

**ANIMAL SPIRITUALITY: INTEGRATING ANIMALS
INTO CONTEMPLATIVE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES**

A Professional Project

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the Faculty of the

Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

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ABSTRACT

ANIMAL SPIRITUALITY: INTEGRATING ANIMALS INTO CONTEMPLATIVE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

By

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This project addresses ways in which the relationship between humans and animals can be formational in spiritual practices, contemplative life, and greater awareness of animal life. The building of relationships with God, animals, and others through contemplative practices helps groups and individuals to experience an intimate relationship with God, where God, by His grace, is present, and where one reaches realization. The outcomes of these practices are peace, insightfulness, compassion for other beings, and justice.

Research on animal-assisted therapy has shown that animals can do wonders for people's physical and mental well-being by providing their owners with unconditional love and loyalty. In return, the experience of caring for animals imparts a sense of belonging and opportunities for play where human and nonhuman animals live in an atmosphere of enjoyment.

The Bible and theology indicate that human as well nonhuman beings are important to God. The book of Genesis shows the beauty of the Garden the first humans and animals received from God. It was a perfect world where fauna and flora were unadulterated. Humans and non-humans lived harmoniously with their own and different species. It was a paradise where Adam and Eve were loving and trusted caregivers for the

animals. After The Fall everything changed; creation deteriorated, suffering emerged, and a relationship among species was broken.

Nature including human and nonhuman beings must be redeemed. However, in the meantime people can live in harmony with animals, caring for them, and fomenting closeness by including them in their spiritual development.

This study led this researcher to conclude that including animals in contemplative practices brings spiritual, psychological, and physiological welfare and inspires people to spend more time in solitude with God.

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A special thank you goes to Professors Andrew Dreitcer and Frank Rogers for their teachings and thoughtful encouragement during my studies. Their knowledge and their example of living contemplatively, dedicated to serving God and his/her creatures, has been a source of constant motivation for me. Thank you to my family, to my friend Rosario Silva, and to Psychologist Dr. Maria Flores for encouraging me to pursue my degree. Thank you to the participants in the six-week course, especially to Pam for sharing her journal. Finally, thank you to God for his inspiration and strength during my entire life.

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DEDICATION

To Emilio Monnet and Clotilde Pouso,
my beloved parents, who rest with the Lord.
You have provided me great love, a wonderful home,
an example of faith, and inherited the passion for animals.

To Romualdo and Princess, my lovable kitties,
who are my buddies in prayer and meditation

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Problem

This project addresses ways in which the relationship between humans and animals can be formational in spiritual practices, contemplative life, and greater awareness of animal life.

Importance of the Problem

The task of including animals in spiritual formation has been my lifelong passion. It is rooted in my earliest memories of loving and caring for animals. I recall as a toddler being in my sacred place, a corner of an upstairs hallway, crying. I had heard one of my brothers sharing with my mother the critical condition of a cow who just had a baby. With a strong measure of empathy, I was able to transfer the feelings of my relationship with my mother to the just-born calf, and I began to consider how this tiny creature could survive the pain of separation if her mother were to die.

Growing up, I followed the example of my parents, particularly my mother, whose passion for animals led her to be involved in the work of animal rescue. The local townspeople knew that we rescued animals so it was not unusual to find abandoned cats and dogs at our home's front door. We would offer thanksgiving prayers or pray for their wellness as a common practice. During those years, I experienced feelings of guilt because of my own passion for the caring of animals. My home church was focused on

saving souls, not in caring for animals. Their members were expected to build into eternity and not into earthly matters. Through my life's experiences I have found numerous churches where no place is provided to pray for animals or to share the joy they bring.

While as a child I loved to attend church, my theology did not seem to fit in with its teachings. I found inconsistencies between Bible stories taught at the Sunday School classes and church practices. My belief was, and still is, that animals were important in God's creation. Isaiah uttered a message of restoration of the world where the lion and the sheep will cohabit under a child's supervision. In church, this image raised questions for me about the worship practices. Why can we not bring our pets to church or at least pray for them there? The church should be a sanctuary for all God's creatures. However, I recall experiences where some church members disliked animals and some would even mistreat cats that jumped into the church facilities. How could an eight-year-old girl reconcile her theology and the practices in her home church?

During my adolescence, the well-being of animals was a personal priority. I could not surrender my intent for reconciling theology and practice. At the same time, my relationship with God was deepening. I started to invest more time in cultivating my spiritual growth through prayer. It was not long before I discerned that God had called me to the ministry.

In thirty-two years of pastoral ministry, I have observed how difficult it is to get the church to develop its spirituality through personal daily spiritual practices. Time and

competitive activities, such as work, media, and outside interests make it difficult for church members to set aside time to meditate, pray, and contemplate God's always-enriching presence. Often, spiritual practices are associated with human-centered actions. Finding inspirational fundamentals in their practices and then building them into an inclusive spirituality is a major challenge for church leadership. Could the relationship between humans and nonhuman beings be incorporated into spiritual practices to bring humans inspiration and inclusiveness? Could humans and creation, particularly animals, benefit from an interconnection to spiritual practices?

Ecology and theology have become compatible disciplines in the postmodern era. Within contemporary reflection, eschatology is seen not only as future after-world happenings, but as a conviction "that everything that happens in the present world occurs within the context of a divine promise of future fulfillment."¹ Although the relationship between the two disciplines has provided the opportunity for Christianity to change its concept of nature, I have not seen ecological issues considered as spiritual at numerous Christian churches.

In fact, I have noticed that there are churches that commonly limit spiritual formation to communal activities, such as worship services, Bible studies, congregational retreats, and prayer meetings. Although these models have their validity, spiritual practices that personally engage with God and God's creation are essential for spiritual

¹John Haught, "Noah and the Diluvium: Orientation toward Future Fulfillment," in *Religion and the New Ecology: Environmental Responsibility in a World in Flux*, ed. David Lodge and Christopher Hamlin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 237.

development and bring awareness of the sanctity of life and mutual benefits for humans and creation.

The introduction of animals into physiotherapy and psychotherapy has motivated me to reflect on the relationship between humans and animals and how it relates to human spirituality. My enrollment in the Doctor in Ministry program at Claremont had a twofold motivation: a deep desire to learn more about spiritual formation and a great hope of finding a place for animals in contemporary Christian practices.

Thesis

The thesis of this study is that the relationship between humans and animals can be integrated into spiritual practices to bring inspiration and inclusiveness to engage the contemplative life and gain greater awareness of animal life.

Definitions of Major Terms

Integration of animals. To integrate animals is to include them in contemplative practices, not as soul matter, but as companions who can benefit from quality time offered to them and benefit people by motivating them to expend more time in prayer and meditation.

Inclusiveness. The term in this work refers exclusively to animals and nature. It means that people will bring animals alongside of them during their time of prayer and meditation and include nature as scenery or as a frame of their time in solitude with God.

In addition to being scenery, nature could be used as part of people's meditation, especially in Mindfulness meditation.

Contemplative life. The contemplative life is permeated with intimacy with God; it is an intuitive experience in which God is present by grace and where a person reaches realization. It is a life where a connection with God is part of a person's daily life. James Finley defines it as "a daily life imbued with contemplative experience which is that kind of intimate, intuitive experience in which the grace of life is realized."² The results of these practices should be reflected in people as peace, insightfulness, compassion for other beings, and justice. People embrace other beings with compassion and justice that is not limited to humans, but is extended to animals and to the planet.

Spirit. The noun, "spirit," comes from the Latin word "spiritus" meaning breath, vitality, and life. "Pneuma" is the Greek word for spirit, while in Hebrew spirit is "ruach." Both terms signify breath, life, and wind.³ Spirit as breath and life has to do with self-transcending, with the connection of a source of life. For the purpose of this work it is God.

Spiritual. It is "the area of human meaning-making, sense of connectedness, and belief in or understanding of the Divine." This definition is effective for understanding the connection between humans and God. Applying the term to a believer, one can

²James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2000), 16.

³Carman S. Gill, Melanie C. Harper, and Stephanie F. Dailey, "Assessing the Spiritual and Religious Domain," in *Integrating Spirituality and Religion into Counseling: A Guide to Competent Practice*, ed. Craig S. Cashwell and Scott J. Young (Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association, 2005), 141-162.

consider that a person is spiritual when she or he intentionally looks for and receives the connection with God.

Spirituality. The meaning of this term sometimes overlaps the meaning of spiritual as can be seen in Briggs and Dixon Rayle's concept of spirituality as being "the deep sense of oneness, wholeness, and connectedness an individual has with the universe, the infinite, and a transcendent force."⁴ The transcendent force for the purpose of this project is the triune God. Kathleen Greider noticed that "the terminology of spirituality, or the spiritual, tends to refer to values and practices that cultivate meaning, help clarify priorities, promote holistic well-being, and honor that which is sacred or otherwise of precious values."⁵ When human beings honor God by cultivating his/her connection with the divine, meaning and well-being, God shows his/her presence in their lives.

Work Previously Done in the Field

Animal-assisted therapy has been a field of my interest for several years. It has led me to inquire into the possibility of integrating animals into people's spiritual development. Having read a variety of related material over the years has given me the platform to conduct this study, for example, *The Role of Foundation for Companions Animals in Counseling and Psychology: Discovering Their Use in the Therapeutic*

⁴Michele KIELTY Briggs and Andrea Dixon Rayle, "Spiritually and Religiously Sensitive Counseling," in *Integrating Spirituality and Religion into Counseling: A Guide to Competent Practice*, ed. Craig S. Cashwell and Scott J. Young (Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association, 2005), 86.

⁵Kathleen J. Greider, *Much Madness Is Divinest Sense: Wisdom of Soul Suffering* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 273.

Process, by Jane K. Wilkes.⁶ Wilkes presents an evaluation of animal-assisted therapy treatment with interview questions, a description of methodologies, ethical considerations, and data collection and analysis. This book assisted me in the last chapter of this work with data and program analysis. Wilkes also affirms that human health benefits from relationships with companion animals. She explains how and why this relationship is effective in counseling and psychology

Aubrey Fine, in his book *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice*, presents the historical context of animal-assisted therapy and the animal-human bond.⁷ The section on conceptual models and the guidelines for assurance and confidence in the patients provides much knowledge about the ways that animals have a positive impact on people with different conditions, from autism in the very young to emotional disorders and the loss of self-confidence, and from physical problems to the fear of accepting one's disabilities in the elderly. His book includes a session on the welfare of assistance and therapy animals from an ethical point of view.

The Animal Ethics Reader, edited by Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler, is an anthology of classic and contemporary readings.⁸ It provides a series of dilemmas

⁶Jane K. Wilkes, *The Role of Companion Animals in Counseling and Psychology: Discovering Their Use in Therapeutic Process* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2000).

⁷Aubrey Fine, ed., *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2000), 3-17.

⁸Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler, eds., *The Animal Ethics Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

about the treatment of animals, such as animal companions, as well as animal laws and animal activism.

Stephen H. Webb presents an account of the nonhuman world, which includes a moral and spiritual discourse.⁹ From a theological perspective he highlights the importance of our relationships with animals as indicators of our spiritual health. He also discusses what is ethical in the treatment of animals.

The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, from East to West, edited by Gordon Mursell, presents a wide spectrum of spiritualities.¹⁰ The story of Christian spirituality begins with Jesus Christ, his teachings, his death and resurrection, and the influence in the life of his followers. From there the author presents several women and men who gave priority to the spiritual realm. These women and men show the cultivation of the spirit by corporate worship and individual prayer, by earth spirituality focused in social action, and quiet retreat into communion with God.

Authors Ann and Barry Ulanov analyze prayer from a psychological perspective. In their book, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*, the Ulanovs affirm that “prayer is that primordial discourse in which we assert . . . our own being,”¹¹ which they call

⁹Stephen H. Webb, *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals* (New York: Oxford, 1998).

¹⁰Gordon Mursell, ed., *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, from East to West* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

¹¹Ann Ulanov and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), vii.

primary. They point out that Melanie A. Klein provided the psychological frame for understanding prayer as primary speech, with its motivations, fears, and projections.¹²

Joseph Driskill, in his book, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises*, points out “the need to nurture an experiential relationship with the holy and the need to recover practices that invite spiritual growth and development.”¹³ People are more willing to participate in spiritual corporate practices than in practicing contemplative disciplines. Moreover, most believers who pray at home spend time in intercessory prayer rather than in contemplative practices. It is not uncommon for a pastor to pass prayer requests to some members, many of them senior women. However, as Driskill urges through his book, by understanding spiritual needs and Christian beliefs, we can encourage individuals to enter into spiritual practices to grow spiritually. I will refer to Driskill’s theological foundations for contemplative practices and the “affective dimension of an experiential relationship with God.”¹⁴

The mystical experience implicit in contemplative life is masterfully analyzed by Dorothee Soelle in her book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. My project presents the concept of integrating animals into contemplative practices following Soelle’s thoughts of mysticism and aestheticism. For this author, “the oft-lamented spiritual impoverishment of today has to be recognized above all in this inability to praise

¹²Ibid., 2-8.

¹³Joseph D. Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History and Practice* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), xii.

¹⁴Ibid., 9.

life.”¹⁵ It is difficult for self-immersed people, even for believers, to praise life and its creator. As a consequence, they are not able to see the surrounding beauty of nature.

Animals serve as mirrors of ourselves. There is a universal language of spirit and wisdom shared by nonhuman and human beings. Susan Chernak McElroy, author of *Animals as Guides for the Soul*, gathers truths and revelations that are as significant as the ones gathered by animal scientists and behaviorists.¹⁶ Through personal stories and stories sent by her readers she shows how a relationship with animals can be life transforming.

Allen M. Schoen in his book, *Kindred Spirits: How the Remarkable Bond Between Humans and Animals Can Change the Way We Live*, explains how the bond between nonhuman and human beings can change the way we live.¹⁷ The transformation is reflected in our loving work for the world and loving care for animals. This veterinarian, through stories, explores that bond and shows how techniques of alternative medicine can help both pets and owners.

Andrew Linzey, in *Creatures of the Same God: Exploration in Animal Theology*, insists that theologians must include animals in theological considerations.¹⁸ He analyzes some contemporary challenges for animal wellness and rights coming from

¹⁵Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistances*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 185.

¹⁶Susan Chernak McElroy, *Animals as Guides for the Soul: Stories of Life-Changing Encounters* (New York: Ballantine Wellspring, 1999).

¹⁷Allen M. Schoen, *Kindred Spirits: How the Remarkable Bond Between Humans and Animals Can Change the Way We Live* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001).

¹⁸Andrew Linzey, *Creatures of the Same God: Explorations in Animal Theology* (New York: Lantern Books, 2009).

ecotheologians, the church, and politicians. Linzey insists that in Christian tradition there are enough sources to believe animals are important in God's kingdom.

Animal Grace: Entering a Spiritual Relationship with our Fellow Creatures, written by Mary Lou Randour, explores the world of spirituality and concludes that spirituality is not isolation. Spirituality grows in relationships with others. In Randour's case, her spiritual growth comes from her relationships with animals. She maintains that animals teach us the language of the spirit. Through our contact with animals humans can become acquainted with the limits imposed by our differences and overcome them. The differences between nonhuman and human beings, the differences between sacred and banal create a divided world depriving us of the joy of reconciliation and personal growth. Randour cogitates that "through our relationship to animals we can recover that which is true within us and, through the discovering of that truth, find our spiritual direction."¹⁹ Randour upholds that animals teach us how to love, how delight in being loved, and how loving ourselves generates more love. Love is fruit of the spirit and is indispensable for transforming the world.

Diana L. Guerrero in *What Animals Can Teach Us about Spirituality* presents ways and examples for a better understanding of animals, information to communicate with them and develop mutual respect, and demonstrations of how animals help us in our

¹⁹Mary Lou Randour, *Animal Grace: Entering a Spiritual Relationship with Our Fellow Creatures* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000), 4.

spiritual and personal growth.²⁰ Animals are spiritual beings; we can learn and receive from them lessons and gifts that will assist us in our spiritual journey.

A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics edited by Paul Waldau and Kimberly Patton, presents the history of animals in religion: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Daoism, and Confucianism. The authors of each chapter analyze the link of animals and religion in our time. Paul Waldau and Kimberly Patton include an essay from Jay McDaniel, "Practice of the Presence of God: A Christian Approach to Animals."²¹

The basis for the physical and emotional foundation for spiritual practices has been studied in the class, "Embodied Spirituality," at Claremont School of Theology with an exceptional professor, Dr. Alane Daugherty. Her book, *The Power Within: From Neuroscience to Transformation*, along with other books used in her class, assisted me to explain psycho-physiological aspects of the spiritual practices.²²

The integration of animals in the field of physiotherapy and psychotherapy has pointed toward the value of communication among species in therapy. However, communication between humans and animals is not the only reason for patients to improve their health. There are neurophysiologic reasons that contribute to the healing

²⁰Diana L. Guerrero, *What Animals Can Teach Us about Spirituality: Inspiring Lessons from Wild and Tame Creatures* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2003).

²¹Jay McDaniel, "Practice of the Presence of God: A Christian Approach to Animals," in *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, ed. Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 133-145.

²²Alane Daugherty, *The Power Within: From Neuroscience to Transformation* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 2008).

process. Researchers have found that anxiety can decrease considerably when using animal therapy with patients. Pulmonary capillary wedge and systolic pulmonary pressure also showed a decrease when a patient interacted with an animal.²³ Other studies have shown that companion pets help children to adjust better to serious illness or loss of someone they love, such as their parents. Other areas include the positive effects of animal therapy in persons with autism, as well as the benefit to physically disabled children who have improved their balance and motility by riding horses.

Merope Pavlides in her book, *Animal-Assisted Interventions for Individuals with Autism*, explains how intervention involving animals can help individuals with autism to develop skills, including sensorial and social skills, manage tough behaviors, and improve their quality of life.²⁴

The variety of perspectives on ecological issues within *All Creation Is Groaning: An Interdisciplinary Vision for Life in a Sacred Universe*, a book edited by Carol J. Dempsey and Russell A. Butkus, is a priceless source for raising ecological awareness. The discourse of different essays highlights the sense of community of life and the imperative need of working in a sustainable development program for the sake of the interconnected community of life including humans, nature, and animals. Dempsey and Butkus state that “the intrinsic value of nature . . . and the sustainability of ecosystems is valued not for the systems themselves and the living organisms that reside there, but for

²³Niki Jepsas, “The Physiological and Psychological Therapy: Examining the Healing Power of Animals,” *Journal of the American Nutraceutical Association* 9, no. 1 (2006): 7-12.

²⁴Merope Pavlides, *Animal-Assisted Interventions for Individuals with Autism* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008).

the sustenance and fulfillment of human need.”²⁵ This is a good argument for claiming ecological responsibility.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The intent of this project was to create a model for the spiritual formation ministry of the church, which integrates animals into spiritual practices. In doing so, people could be motivated to cultivate their spirit through contemplative spiritual disciplines, develop awareness of animal life, and become ecologically responsible. The project is built upon the work done in the field of spirituality, theology, and animal psychotherapy.

While the model proposed in this study could be applied to other faiths and places without the church, and to other spiritual practices beside the contemplatives, this project is focused on the Christian faith, the local church, and the contemplative spiritual practices. The rationale for this constraint complies with the length and time frame of the project and with my acquaintance with the Christian faith. Undoubtedly, there is some tension between the constraints of the project and the longing to be comprehensive, extending the study to other faiths.

The intended audience of this project was ministers and lay leaders in local churches who desire to strengthen their ministry of spiritual formation by encouraging their members to pursue personal spiritual development through daily contemplative practices.

²⁵Carol Dempsey and Russell Butkus, eds., *All Creation Is Groaning: An Interdisciplinary Vision for Life in a Sacred Universe* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 149.

While the timeframe of this research could not generate an analysis of the practices and their results on the congregation over an extended period of time, the outcome from this brief research provided useful information on the subject of the integration of animals into contemplative practices and the reactions of the participants.

Procedure for Integration

The project used a varied methodology including library and proactive qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research included videotaped sections of the spiritual formation program in a local church and participants' journals of the experiences of praying with pets over the same period of time. The quantitative research, a survey to assess individuals' prayer frequency and their openness for integrating animals into spiritual practices, was administered to three churches from the Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

At the local church, it was implemented through a six-week course on contemplative practices between the first week of August and the second week of September 2011. The course began with an introduction session that was videotaped, followed by four sessions, each teaching a different contemplative practice. During the last session, participants shared their experiences. This session was also videotaped.

By videotaping two discussion sessions, participants' opinions as well as their feelings about their own spirituality, creation, animals, and ecological issues were collected. As the researcher, I was personally involved with the practice. As a

consequence, my subjectivity was clearly present so the reader could easily become aware and evaluate it.

The participants' journal information provided data for narrative descriptions of people praying with animals. The narrations were an illustrative instrument for the study.

The survey, which was administered to different churches, provided significant data to measure time invested in individual spiritual practices according to gender, age, ethnicity, and kind of leadership as well as their surveyed reaction to integrating animals into contemplative spiritual practices.

Finally, the program implementation provided information for new paradigms of spiritual formation.

Outline of the Study

This study includes the following chapters:

Chapter 1 is the Introduction where I present personal memories, my thesis, and explain about my work by mentioning the work previously done, the procedures for integration, and the plans to complete this thesis.

Chapter 2, "Animals in Genesis," analyzes the story of creation and the flood, and mentions the story of Balaam and the mule. I highlight the importance of animals in God's eyes.

Chapter 3, "Physiological and Psychological Approach to Prayer and Meditation," lays out the theoretical framework and includes the physiological and psychological bases for the study.

Chapter 4, “Interdisciplinary Approach to Spirituality,” examines the relationship among theology, spirituality, ethics, and ecology.

Chapter 5, “New Paradigms for Spiritual Formation,” proposes the integration of animals into contemplative spiritual practices by describing some traditional practices and adding the animals as a new component to them.

Chapter 6, “Data and Program Review,” describes, analyzes, and evaluates the six-week program of spiritual formation the data gathered.

Chapter 7 “Conclusion,” presents the answers to which I have arrived after researching the topic I chose for the thesis, Animal Spirituality.

CHAPTER 2

ANIMALS IN GENESIS

The Story of Creation

There are several theses about creation. Stephen H. Webb in his book, *The Dome of Eden: A New Solution to the Problem of Creation and Evolution*, presents five theories about creation. The theory about the unique space and time of Eden is discussed here.

This theory sustains that the Garden of Eden existed. It had its place and its time. Pre-modern theologians argue that it was destroyed by the flood; this is the reason that it cannot be found. The book of Genesis shows the beauty of the Garden the first humans received from God. It was a perfect world, fauna and flora were unadulterated. It is obvious that a soil that produced wonderful vegetation would be rich in minerals. Men and women also were pictured as perfect. Webb discloses his position by stating, “I want to insist that Genesis is really true, even though its subject matter is set apart from the world as we know it.”¹ Webb describes why it is challenging to think of that world as true because humans are living in a world of scarcity where species are struggling for survival. He says, “Genesis is a fantastic account of the world because the truth itself is fantastic. . . . Eden and all of its details are true.”² Webb defends his position by explaining that the reason the story/history of creation looks like a myth is because living

¹Stephen H. Webb, *The Dome of Eden: A New Solution to the Problem of Creation and Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 155.

²*Ibid.*, 155-156.

in the present world, it is very difficult to think that such a perfect world as Eden ever existed.

Time is also challenging to understand. Was creation literally finished in six 24-hour days, or should that time period be taken in a figurative sense? Has the earth existed six thousand or millions of years? Without giving an answer, Webb clarifies the point by explaining that in Eden time was not experienced like we experience it today.³ Adam and Eve were not living subject to time in the sense they were not living by a calendar of activities, trying to accomplish an agenda by the end of the day. Their duty was to care for the animals and they lived in togetherness with them. As Webb asserts, “Edemic time was neither timeless nor timed by the ticking of a clock.”⁴ He also argues that time in Genesis was compressed, explaining that compression is the way an event is described or abbreviated. However, an abbreviated version of any event should be spread out and the gaps filled in so that when it is meticulously studied one gets the entire truth. Since modern day theorists do not know what has been un-told, they must follow some rules to interpret what has been told.

The first chapters of Genesis present the story of creation. God is the creator who worked to construct a world where animals and humans could live in harmony, valuing diversity and fairness. Following Rashi, a Jewish scholar in Ancient Hebrew from the eleventh century, the translation of the first three verses of Genesis is, “In the beginning of God’s creating the heavens and the earth (now the earth was waste and emptiness, and

³Ibid., 158.

⁴Ibid., 159.

darkness on the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering on the face of the water), God said ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”⁵

The narration of the first creation starts with a statement, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” (Gen. 1:1).⁶ The world occurred from chaos. God established a place for each thing he/she created and named it. The Hebrew verb for creation is *bara*; the subject of this verb in the Hebrew Bible always is God. That means each thing of creation emerged as a masterpiece of God’s creation including nonhuman and human beings. God appraised his/her work as good. According to Sebastian Kizhakkeyil, “This is a universe that is good, ordered, non-violent, and full of blessings.”⁷ As the outcome of the same creation, we are bound to God and other beings.

The earth was empty and disorganized; darkness covered it as if it was a dome. Waters were the scenery where God’s presence was. We perceived God’s presence through God’s wind sweeping over the waters (Gen. 1:2). The same Hebrew word for wind is the same for spirit.⁸ Then, the spirit of God was moving in the way of a wind, over the waters. Between verse 1 and 2 there is a gap. Theologians have tried to explain the gap in different ways. Guthrie and Motyer interpret the first verse as the beginning of the story of six days of creation: “God created” would describe the absolute creation from

⁵Rashi, *Bereishis*, vol. 3 of *The Metsudah Chumash/Rashi: A New Linear Translation*, by Avrohom Davis, 2nd rev. ed. (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1993), 14.

⁶This scriptural quotation is from the King James Version of the Bible (NRV). All subsequent quotations are also from this version.

⁷Sebastian Kizhakkeyil, *The Pentateuch: An Exegetical Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed. (Mumbai: Saint Paul Press, 2009), 87.

⁸W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001), 16.

ex-nihilo, and from that chaos God made (“asah,” an anthropomorphic verb that means to make an artisanal work) a delightful world.⁹

The light was made by God’s commandment, giving a place for the day and night; a separation of the light from the darkness (Gen. 1: 3-5). Ambrose, one of the Fathers of the Church, affirms that “God is the author of the light, and the place and cause of the darkness.”¹⁰ He also comments about the goodness of the work that God proclaimed, considering it a commendation of the initial part of the divine work, “[God] foreseeing what is going to happen as something completed, commends his work which is still in its initial stages, being already cognizant of its termination.”¹¹

God states the resolution of separating the waters and created morning and evening (Gen. 1:6-8). He/she separated water from the waters by making a dome that is known as the sky. With this creative act, God took another step to prepare the earth for living beings, animals and humans. This expansion provided air for breathing, and works as protection from the light of the sun.¹²

God created the dry land and the plants bearing seeds during the third day (Gen. 1:9-13). In verses 9-10 God worked with what he already had created. She/he added more order to the earth separating the waters from the land. Verses 11-12 describe the land

⁹D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer, eds., *Nuevo Comentario Biblico* (El Paso, TX: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1977), 77

¹⁰*Genesis I-II*, ed. Andrew Louth, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 7.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 8.

¹²John C. Jeske, *Genesis*, rev. ed., *The People’s Bible Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 15.

producing plants with seed and trees.¹³ God was preparing the perfect setting for animals and man. The last of these verses mention morning and evening, which were mentioned in verse 8. Rosemary Radford Ruether noted:

In the first chapter of Genesis humans are given all seed-bearing plants and fruits for food. The animals, birds and reptiles are given the green plants for food. No animals are given as food for human or for each other. This suggests that, in the original state of innocence, human and even animals were vegetarians! Only after the corruption of humans in cities, and flood by which God punished the wicked generation of early urban people, were clean animals and birds offered as sacrifices to God and given as food for humans.¹⁴

God also created “a greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night,” which we name sun and moon (Gen. 1:14-19). Jeske recalls, “Their first purpose was to separate day from night. Second, they were to serve as signs marking seasons, days, and years. And finally they were to give light on the earth.”¹⁵ I can see how God was working to prepare the world for the climax of his/her work, the creation of animals and man.

God’s creative work came to its climax with the creation of animals and human beings (Gen. 1:22-30). It is proper to point out that in the first story of creation humans and animals were created on the same day. Birch upholds that “the common destiny of animals and humankind could hardly be underlined more emphatically.”¹⁶ We must

¹³R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 28, 29.

¹⁴Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Men, Women, and Beasts: Relations to Animals in Western Culture,” in *Good News for Animals? Christian Approaches to Animal Well-Being*, ed. Charles Pinches and Joy B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 15.

¹⁵Jeske, *Genesis*, 20.

¹⁶Charles Birch and Lukas Vischer, *Living with the Animals: The Community of God’s Creatures* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 105.

identify animals as fellow creatures. Basil the Great talks about relationships among God's creatures and advises human beings not to take advantage of their power to subjugate others.¹⁷ Saint Francis of Assisi, in his ascetic life, had respect for the life of other beings, and lived in closeness with animals, respecting and loving them as creatures of God. Psalm 148 is an expression of gratitude to God for his/her creation and an invitation to the whole creation to praise the Lord. It is a praise of a community of beings who rely on one another to live.¹⁸ It is praise from humans who appreciate creation and recognize the value of ecology. Kevin Irwin stated that liturgies are demanding attention to creation. He insisted that "creation offers motives for praising the Lord [and] creation itself and is a demonstration of the divine in human life."¹⁹ The church must remind its attendees through liturgy about the interaction of nature and human labor and warn other laborers by its example.²⁰ We must be light in darkness, we must be witnesses in the world of God's purposes in creation. We must respect nature, keeping its place without invading it. We must respect and care for animals. We must stop animal abuse. We must save each species. We must consider nature sacramental; it will help us to take nature more solicitous.

The conviction that creation is for renewal ("re-adaption" for J. R. Hyland and "redemption" for Holmes Rolston III), and knowing that creation is groaning, as the

¹⁷Ibid., 31.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 99.

²⁰Ibid.

apostle Paul says (Rom. 8:22), should give a foundation for a Christian ethic regarding nonhuman being and nature.²¹

The following expression has grabbed my attention: “Be fruitful.” This expression is repeated in verses 22 and 28. It is God’s commandment to all living beings, animals and humankind. After creating the marine animals and the birds, God blessed them. The same blessing is given to Adam and Eve in verse 28. Human and nonhuman animals received the same blessing and the same commandment from God.

Genesis 2 focuses on the Garden of Eden. There is a detailed description of the beauty and the harmony in the garden. God brought the animals to Adam to be named and cared for. Adam spent time naming them. Humans and the animals lived in closeness; they shared space and food. Andrew Linzey considered that sharing space was possible for the commonalties that humans have with animals. Furthermore, commonalties could be understood as a “covenant,” according to Linzey, and a covenant is essential for living in community. He points out that what makes it possible for human and nonhuman animals to live together is that they also share a common creation; God created both beings by the same spirit, the “ruach.”²²

Douglas J. Green poetically describes Eden’s garden with its gardener who is God. He affirms that God was not only the creator but the creator king and “one

²¹J. R. Hyland, *God's Covenant with Animals: A Biblical Basis for the Humane Treatment of All Creatures* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000); Holmes Rolston III, “Does Nature Need to Be Redeemed?” *Zygon* 29, no. 2 (June 1994): 205-229.

²²Andrew Linzey, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 30.

dimension of this kingship is his role as a gardener who greens the wasteland in Genesis 1:2, making unproductive land productive (Gen 1:11-12).”²³

Stephen Vantassel differs with Linzey on the interpretation of the creation story. Vantassel assumes the ontological human superiority over animals. Furthermore, he argues that human beings have authority over all other beings. Vantassel and Linzey agree that there are commonalities between animals and humans, but Vantassel doesn't consider animals and humans as equals. His argument for supporting the non-equality position is that “man's creation was different from that of animals.”²⁴ Birch and Vischer affirm that Judeo-Christian tradition is anthropocentric. It puts humankind at the center of creation and reduces the rest of creation to a supportive system for humans; it makes all creatures subject to them. However, the language used in the Bible shows that animals were part of the environment and lived with humans as a community. According to Genesis 1, Adam and the animals were created on the same day. In the second creation narrated in Genesis 2, God created man and animals as companions. To Adam is given the privilege and, at the same time, the responsibility of naming the animals, bringing even more closeness between humans and nonhumans.²⁵

²³Douglas J. Green, “When the Gardener Returns: An Ecological Perspective on Adam's Dominion” in *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective*, ed. Noah J. Toly, and Daniel I. Block (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 269.

²⁴Stephen Vantassel, *Dominion Over Wildlife? An Environmental Theology of Human-Wildlife Relations* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publication, 2009), 163.

²⁵Birch and Vischer, *Living with the Animals*, 2-5.

God created Adam in his/her own image and “breathed the breath of life into Adam.”²⁶ There is also “greater intimacy involved in the narration of man's creation as compared to that of the animals.”²⁷ Vantassel understands that animals were brought to Adam to be shepherded. He defines the term “dominion” as “shepherdism.” Shepherdism is a neologism introduced by Vantassel, which means to accept “the reality of human power [over creation] but seeks to integrate that power into a comprehensive view of human-nature relations.”²⁸

Shepherdism allows humans to use animals without abusing them. It is a concept about using human power over creation to care for the earth and all beings, of using the power by being ecologically responsible.²⁹

As Hyland explains, at the Garden of Eden man and animals shared a common geographical space, living as a harmonic community, interacting, and supporting each other. Perhaps the difficulties for accepting this claim came from the fact that, since Noah’s Covenant, a peaceable kingdom has not yet existed.”³⁰

The Flood

The end of the perfection in Garden of Eden with the fall of humans gave place to a life of sin and all kinds of corruption. The heart of the humans had become evil (Gen.

²⁶Stephen Vantassel, “A Biblical View of Animals: A Critical Response to the Theology of Andrew Linzey,” *Emmaus Journal* 12 (2003): 177-195.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 192.

²⁸Vantassel, *Dominion over Wildlife*, 178.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 160-178.

³⁰Hyland, *God’s Covenant with Animals*, 3-14.

6:5). God, the creator of a perfect world and a peaceable kingdom, couldn't tolerate such degeneration of his/her creation. Moreover, he/she felt sorry for having created humans (Gen. 6:6).³¹ It is interesting that in this account it is not mentioned that God was sorry for having created animals. The evil was in man and woman. The earth was filled with violence. As a way to avoid evil spreading, God decided to erase all living creatures from the earth except Noah, a righteous person, his family, and a pair of each animal and seven pairs of the considered clean animals (Gen. 6:7, 8). Five categories of living beings were mentioned in Genesis 1. From these categories, animals of different species were in the ark, except the marine ones that could survive the flood.³²

The water covered the earth causing the death of all beings except those who were in the ark. After a period of time, the extent of which is interpreted in different ways, a wind blowing on the earth evaporated the waters. A dove was in charge of detecting the level of the waters and bringing the good news at the end of the flood. Here we have an animal as God's agent to keep humans informed about the flood. Animals are part of God's plan for the world.

We have several examples of animals' cooperation with God's work, among them Balaam and the donkey. God has spoken and talked to humans through animals. In Numbers 22:1-35 we find the story of Balaam and the donkey. Balaam was tempted by a lucrative offer. An enemy of Israel wanted him to generate alarm among the Israelites

³¹Kizhakkeyil, *The Pentateuch*, 107-110.

³²Jeske, *Genesis*, 83.

with prophecies. Balaam seemed to think he was doing what God wanted when he set off to work with Balak, but God was determined to stop him.

This is a story used more for children. However, behind the humor of the narrative there are several lessons, one of them is how God can speak and be revealed through animals. Morley comments that animal characters were common in ancient Hebrew literature, stimulating the imagination, and that this passage is included in the lectionary for liturgical use on the third Sunday after Easter. He found a substantial reason for its inclusion in the lectionary: “The reason is clear,” he stated. “It is full of the stuff of life. It is an elemental human story.”³³ In addition, this story is mentioned in the New Testament by the Lord, Peter, and James. In his messages to the churches in Asia, the Lord recalled the story in this words, “But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality” (Rev. 2:14). Peter says, “Forsaking the right way they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the ways of unrighteousness, but he received a rebuke for his own transgression; for a dumb donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet (II Peter 2:15-16).” Finally, Jude discusses the passage, “Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah” (Jude 11).

³³R. Wragge Morley, “Third Sunday After Easter. Balaam—Desire in Conflict with Conscience,” *Expository Times* 53, no. 7 (April 1942): 234.

Balaam was riding down the road on his donkey. An angel of God stood in the middle of the road with a sword in his hand. Even though Balaam and his servants did not see anything, the donkey did. Balaam was not pleased, and he struck the donkey, forcing her to continue the journey. Back on the road the angel appeared again and Balaam did not see it; he forced the donkey to the road again. By the third apparition of the angel and in front of the inability of Balaam to discern this encounter, the donkey spoke and Balaam's eyes were opened to the angelical vision.

Rashi writes, “Be he [Balaam] did not see him [the angel], for the Holy One, blessed be He, gave an animal power to see more than the man, for just because he [man] possesses sense, his mind would become perturbed if he sees noxious beings.”³⁴ It is interesting to note that a scholar who wrote almost one thousand years ago recognized that man could not comprehend the vision of an angel without becoming perturbed. What does Rashi mean with this statement? Probably that self-pride and self-sufficient people could not accept, in general, that God could send an angel to teach them. However, an animal accepted God's message immediately, accepting any means by which God chose to reveal himself.

In this passage the animal seems to be spiritually more sensitive than her owner. She was able to discern a divine agent, the angel. She was chosen by God as a messenger. Finally, she denounced her abuse, animal abuse.

As Balaam's donkey, the dove also cooperated with God as a messenger. The fact that she returned with a piece of an olive branch brings me ecological awareness. We

³⁴Rashi, *Bereishis*, 211.

must care not only for animals but also for nature in general. When the dove did not return, Noah knew the waters had gone. The dove was a messenger of good news even when she disappeared from the story. Present and absent, animals can bring us messages or a revelation. Joyce, a pet lover who participates in a six-week course of introducing animals into contemplative practices, had a wonderful experience.³⁵ During the practice of Ignatian Prayer, she chose the passage from the Bible where the psalmist recognized that God knew him from the womb of his mother (Psalm 139). No animal was present in this Psalm, nor was there an animal in the classroom. However, she received a revelation by visualizing her dogs. She thought how much she loves her three dogs, Noel, Holly, and Mardi; suddenly, she had a revelation that God, who formed her in the womb of her dearest mother, gave her this love for animals. It was a special experience where the Lord reaffirmed her passion for animals and encouraged her to spend time in meditation with her four-legged companions, which included not only dogs, but four horses and a cat. God delivered a personal message to Joyce through some absent dogs.

Animal sacrifices were ordered by God after the flood. They were not part of his/her initial plan. When humans failed to accomplish God's will and commandments, animals became a means by which to cover their failures or sins. Violence has entered into the world and nothing has been the same since that time. As discussed earlier, the apostle Paul affirms that the whole creation yearns for redemption (Rom. 8:22).

There is ample evidence in the Hebrew Bible of a diversity of sacrifices. When Noah left the ark, he offered a sacrifice of gratitude to God. Writing about the effects of

³⁵Joyce's name has been used with her permission.

sacrifices, Rogerson mentions that the value of sacrifices in the Old Testament depended on the attitude of the one who offered it. He cites as an example the sons of Eli who used their position for personal gain. Offering animal sacrifices was merely part of a priestly ritual for them (I Sam. 2:12-17). Job is an example of a person who made animal sacrifices with sincerity (Job 1:5).³⁶ Rogerson discusses three different periods of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible. In the first, by the time of the early monarchy, people worshiped at many local sanctuaries, and sacrifices were offered by priests and heads of families. In the second period, during the reign of Josiah, sacrifices were offered in Jerusalem (2 Kings 23:1-25). The book of Deuteronomy establishes rules and different meanings for the sacrifices. In the third period, sacrifices were offered by the priest in ceremonies, such as the Annual Day of Atonement. The meaning of sacrifices was mostly related to the vicarious sacrifice of Christ.³⁷ As can be observed, the meaning of sacrifices varied with the periods.

The prophet Isaiah utters “he who slaughters an ox is like him who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like him who breaks a dog’s neck” (Is. 66:3). He also states:

The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me? says the Lord. I have more than enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. . . . Your hands are full of blood: wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. (Is. 1:11, 15-16).

³⁶J. W. Rogerson, “What Is the Meaning of Animal Sacrifice,” in *Animals on the Agenda*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 8.

³⁷*Ibid.* 9.

The prophet Hosea “spoke out in the name of God against the killing taking place on the altars.”³⁸ “For Ephraim in his sin has multiplied altars, altars have become his sin. Though they sacrifice flesh as offering to me and eat them, I the Lord will not accept them” (Hos. 8:11-13).

Amos, the prophet, also declares how wrong God’s people were in offering animal sacrifices to him/her.

I hate and despise your feasts, I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals. When you offer me holocausts, I reject your oblations, and refuse to look at your sacrifices of fattened cattle . . . but let justice flow like water, and integrity like an unfailing stream. Did you bring me sacrifice and oblation in the wilderness for all those forty years, House of Israel? (Am. 5:21-22, 24-25)

J. R. Hyland asserts that “the prophets taught that God’s blessings would abound only in a world where human beings rejected violence.”³⁹ It was not God’s purpose to demand the blood of innocent animals; it was for the hardest heart of the sinners that sacrifice entered in the Hebrew religion. The message of the prophets was a call to come back to a spiritual and peaceable life, the one that existed at the Garden of Eden.

Theological Basis

The Bible shows how much God cares for animals. Animals are included in God’s commandments. There is a specific order for securing Sabbath rest for all creation including animals (Ex. 20:10).

Compassion toward animals and laws that prevent cruelty are registered in several books of the Bible, such as in Deut. 22:10: “You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey

³⁸Hyland, *God’s Covenant with Animals*, 8.

³⁹Ibid.

yoked together”; Lev. 22: 28: “But you shall not slaughter, from the herd or the flock, an animal with its young on the same day”; and Ex. 23:4-5: “When you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.”

The prophets discuss returning to a peaceable kingdom. Hosea says, “I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety” (Hos. 2:18). Isaiah presents a visualized future kingdom:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy all on my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters on the sea. (Is. 11:1-9)

Animals are on God’s agenda. Linzey and Yamamoto in their book *Animals on the Agenda*, gather theological and biblical support to reinforce their view that God has placed animals under our care and protection, and commands us to include them in our lives with respect and compassion, that is our duty.⁴⁰

John Muir, a great defender of wildlife, considers that wild nature is a great source for spirituality. He says, “Mountains, parks, and reservations are useful not only

⁴⁰ Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto, eds., *Animals on the Agenda: Questions about Animals for Theology and Ethics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers but as fountains of life.”⁴¹ God has created both human beings and animals from dust. This is significant for animal ethics. We must treat animals as God’s special creation because they are very similar to us. As we develop our spiritual life, we can include nature and animals. Mountains and rivers could be sacred spaces for us. Animals could be sacred companions in our spiritual life. They are sources of great inspiration to connect with God. They can remind us of the gracious God who created the paradise which tells us the purpose of God, for us to live in a peaceable community with other beings. Jane Goodall, founder of the Jane Goodall Institute, which has established sanctuaries for orphaned great apes, has observed how these animals are capable of showing feelings of contentment and sorrow as we do.⁴² Do they deserve being cared for and love from us who know from firsthand what these feelings are? Could we include them in contemplative practices? I can imagine how beautiful and worthwhile it would be to meditate with one of these apes. I can imagine how close to God I would feel while changing the diapers of orphan chimpanzees. It would remind me the wonder of God’s creation and the likeness of these beings with us.

Princess, one of my cats, was raised on a bottle. One of my parishioners came to my office bringing this abandoned, tiny kitty that she had found, not more than a week old. Princess’s eyes were not open yet and of course she was not able to eat by herself nor to urinate and defecate without being hand-stimulated. The vulnerability of this precious

⁴¹John Muir, as cited in J. Baird Callicott, “Valuing Wildlife,” in *The Animal Ethics Reader*, ed. Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler (New York: Routledge, 2008), 441.

⁴²Jane Goodall, “Problems Faced by Wild and Captive Chimpanzees: Finding Solutions,” in *The Animal Ethics Reader*, ed. Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler (New York: Routledge, 2008), 175.

creature as well as the position of her body as she drank the milk, and the fact that she burped, reminded me of a little child. For the last two weeks I have been caring for Pixeo, a one-year-old cat, while my friend Lucy and her family are on vacation. Pixeo misses his family. His demand of affection, time, and care is almost the same as his owner Kristal, a seven-year-old girl would require if I were babysitting her.⁴³ These cases illustrate the similarity between humans and nonhuman beings.

Stephen Webb points out that “most people in the Christian West do not connect the love of animals with religious obligation and duty.”⁴⁴ There are faithful people who believe animals have nothing to do with religion. They don’t visualize a place for animals in spirituality. The fact that we should keep God’s covenant with humankind, makes animals part of our spirituality. Caring for animals is a commitment to God for caring for his/her creation. Could we enlarge this picture to see animals as cohorts in our spiritual development? It could be possible that Eve and Adam walked in the garden close to animals meditating on the grandeur of God.

⁴³The names of these participants have been changed to protect their identity.

⁴⁴Stephen H. Webb, *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

CHAPTER 3

PHYSIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES
TO PRAYER AND MEDITATION*Historical Review of Psychophysiology*

Psychophysiology is an interdisciplinary science that studies the relationship between the mind and the body. Historically, those who study psychophysiology have been interested in the effects of psychological conditions on physiological functions, focusing on psychosomatic or psychophysiological disorders. However, psychophysiological perspectives have expanded over the past decades. At the present, the field focuses on the effects that neural and physiological factors have on psychological processes. Summarizing, psychophysiology “is intimately related to anatomy and physiology but is also concerned with psychological phenomena—the experience and behavior of organisms in the physical and social environment.”¹

Although its roots can be traced back through the centuries, its birth as a discipline occurs in the second half of the past century.² Nevertheless, since the nineteenth century, much research has been made from the psychophysiological perspective, for example, studies conducted by Fere in 1888, Tarchanoff in 1890, and Pavlov in 1927. The first two studies investigated the electro-dermal responses and their sensitivity to psychological processes; Pavlov studied the conditioning of autonomic and

¹John Cacioppo, Louis G. Tassinary, and Gary G. Berntson, *Handbook of Psychophysiology*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.

²John Cacioppo, “Social Psychophysiology,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76 (2000): 839-855.

visceral responses. Presently, the field of psychophysiology has grown and become an empirical field that has molded clinical concepts, research, and applications. Examples of this molding are as follows:

A general shift in perspective from a peripheral to a central psychophysiology, a progressive trend from an emphasis on lower reflex mechanisms to the influence of higher and more complex rostral neural system . . . , a corresponding shift from a predominant focus on efferent processes to the recognition of reciprocal afferent–efferent interactions, and a parallel transition from constructs of global influences on mind and body to more specific patterns of determinants.³

Understanding the Physiological Basis of Our Spirituality

Recently, science and spirituality have become closer. In the twentieth century this closeness was responsible for advancements in psychiatry, which assume that spirit and body are a unit and that emotions have a physiological basis. The brain is connected to the whole body. This relationship with mind and brain is very deep. Siegel observed that “the mind itself can be viewed as both embodied and relational, our brains actually can be considered the social organ of the body: Our minds connect with one another via neural circuitry in our bodies.”⁴ He points out the importance of the interrelationships among the brain, the mind, and relationships.⁵ For instance, when people feel love, the secretion of the oxytocin hormone is activated in the hypothalamus; when they are feeling hate, the level of corticoids, especially cortisol, increases. Alane Daugherty cited Candace Pert, who explained that “neuropeptides of emotion are released throughout the

³Ibid., 842.

⁴Daniel J. Siegel, *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 48.

⁵Ibid., 49.

body, and every cell has receptor sites for those neuropeptides.”⁶ The heart starts to beat in the fetus before the formation of the brain,⁷ and sometimes keeps beating after the brain has died. According to Childre and Martin, recent neurophysiological research has revealed that the heart has an independent nervous system. They explained that the heart with its own nervous system and its own “brain” sends signals to the brain in the cranium, which affect the functions in the amygdala, the hypothalamus, and the cortex.⁸ The amygdala is correlated with emotions; the hypothalamus is the “master hormone regulator,”⁹ also affecting emotions; and the cortex is associated with learning and reasoning.

Scientists of HeartMath have found that the communication between the heart, the brain, and the rest of the body is tridimensional. The communication results through the transmission of nervous impulses, through hormones and neurotransmitters, and by pressure waves. This technically is understood as a heart’s neurological, biochemical, and biophysical way of communicating.

Heartbeats generate an eruption of neural information to the brain. This neurological information affects the performance of its own centers, including the heart, the blood vessels, and other glands and organs in the body.¹⁰

⁶Candace Pert, *Molecules of Emotions: The Science Behind Mind-Body Medicine* (New York: Scribner, 1997), quoted in Alane Daugherty, *The Power Within: From Neuroscience to Transformation* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 2007), 137.

⁷Doc Childre and Howard Martin, *The HeartMath Solution* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 9.

⁸*Ibid.*, 10.

⁹Siegel, *The Mindful Brain*, 34.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 30.

There are other biochemical activities, not generated in the heart, related to spiritual and psychological happenings. In researching the stress process and its impact, Daugherty indicates that cortisol and oxytocin play an important role. Cortisol, a steroid hormone, is associated with the increment of the blood sugar, body fat, increasing the aging process, and is an agent of emotions that don't favor healthy emotions. Cortisol is released as a response to stress by the adrenal cortex.¹¹ Stress is "a sense of inner turmoil resulting from our perceptions and reactions to events and conditions, [a] state of negative emotional arousal, usually associated with feelings of discomfort or anxiety that we attribute to our circumstance or situation."¹² However, the responsibility of this discomfort is not the circumstance but the way the amount of energy used is produced from the sugar and fatty acid levels elevated by the cortisol. The energy well used to challenge difficult situations becomes a risk when we are submitted to these kinds of situations for long periods of time. Prolonged periods of stress can cause the brain to secrete more cortisol. Our brain can then become soaked in cortisol deteriorating the capacities of brain upkeep and learning. This negatively affects the function of the immunological system.¹³

Oxytocin has been described as the hormone of love, since it is related to those types of feelings. "This tiny chemical, released from the hypothalamus region of the brain, gives rat mothers the urge to nurse their pups, keeps male prairie voles

¹¹Daugherty, *The Power Within*, 52-54.

¹²Childre and Martin, *The HeartMath Solution*, 270.

¹³Louis Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Healing the Social Brain*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2010), 311-312.

monogamous and, even more remarkable, makes people trust each other more,”¹⁴ and also causes human mothers to nurse and hug their children. This hormone, synthesized in nerve cells in the hypothalamus, exemplifies the interaction of the hormonal and neural systems through emotions.

Emotions affect our physiological condition and, conversely, physiological conditions affect our emotions. Long-time stress stimulates the secretion of cortisol, which is in charge of producing energy from sugar and fatty acids to respond to difficult situations. Oxytocin is related to positive emotions and those emotions act as a stimulus for its secretion.¹⁵

In his letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul blessed the church members with peace and integrity for their spirit, soul, and body: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23). Under the influence of Plato’s philosophy, Paul considers humans tripartite but as a holistic unit. As a unit we should value each one of our components. The practice of spiritual disciplines originates with physical and psychological responses. Ancient wisdom used spiritual disciplines to cultivate positive emotions. Mental and spiritual practices create internal changes. Researchers have shown positive changes in the body in general, particularly the brain and the psyche when practicing prayer and meditation.¹⁶

¹⁴Nicholas Wade, “Depth of the Kindness Hormone Appears to Know Some Bounds,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2011, D1.

¹⁵Daugherty, *The Power Within*, 52-54.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 145.

The Role of Animals in Psychotherapy

Pets can do wonders for people's physical and mental well-being because they provide their owners with unconditional love and loyalty. In return, the experience of caring for an animal gives its owner a sense of having something that belongs to him/her as well as opportunities for play and enjoyment. For many animal lovers there is no substitute for the emotional rewards of owning a pet. Owning a pet helps people expand their narrow focus beyond themselves, helping them to feel connected to a larger world. Speechless communication with a pet, such as simply observing a cat or a fish, may produce a relaxation response in the pet owner's body, stimulating the oxytocin secretion and thus lowering his/her heart rate and blood pressure.

It is common to see animals in convalescent homes. Many of these places have birds. It is amazing to see the patients interacting with them. Some patients talk to the birds and the birds respond by coming closer to the patients or by singing. Patients who are not able to talk spend time simply watching the birds. For a patient who has difficulty speaking or who cannot speak, watching the birds, observing their colors and tracing their movements, and listening to their singing can be a way to increase the patient's confidence in communication. When they watch birds, patients do not feel limited by their lack of verbal communication. These patients can communicate with other species successfully with their eyes and emotions without language. This experience opens their minds to a bigger world of possibilities in communication.

Burbank Convalescent Home in California has cat therapy. I visited its facilities and observed how the cats stop to visit the patients; they jump on the patients' beds and

allow them to pet them. Many patients, facing the end of their life, find that having something alive next to them brings hope. The ability to touch cats' fur and hear their purring can prove to be a relaxing experience.

Researchers once surveyed a group meeting for psychiatric inpatients held in a room where caged finches were located. They found that this meeting had higher attendance, higher levels of patient participation, and was associated with more improvement in scores on the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale when it was compared to a matching group meeting held in a room without birds.¹⁷ A neighbor of mine, who is disabled, adopted a dog and named her Molly. Molly became Mrs. Conn's loyal companion.¹⁸ She walked Molly next to her wheelchair. Mrs. Conn was so proud of her dog and began to spend more time outdoors; she gained skills with her hands due to handling her dog's leash. Her confidence increased as she developed her skills with Molly. A few months later, Mrs. Conn volunteered herself and Molly to visit convalescent homes, pleased that Molly had become a working dog. Because of Molly, my neighbor also was working and helping others. The difference that Molly made in her life was obvious.

My mom, who is 91 years old, has benefited from a relationship with her canaries, her dog Lucky, and her cat Bonita. Having been a very active woman, aging as well as having to see her six children leave home has not been easy. Her canaries have been a great source of joy. Taking care of the birds has offered my mom a sense of being

¹⁷A. Beck, L. Seraydarian, and G. Hunter, "The Use of Animals in the Rehabilitation of Psychiatric Inpatients," *Psychological Reports* 58 (1986): 63-66.

¹⁸Name has been changed to protect her identity.

needed. These creatures depend on my mom just as used to depend on her. When my mom feeds the canaries, they sing, and that brings great satisfaction to her. Lucky and Bonita are her “tots”; they provide her with a sense of relaxation and security. Bonita’s purr is like a sleeping pill for my mom. Lucky is her little guardian. He wakes up in the night and walks my mom to the restroom, waiting for her at the door. Lucky’s habit brought back to my mom the confidence to walk after she had been sick and lost the ability to walk.

Nancy Parish-Plass conducted a study at Bayit Lechol Yeled B'Yisrael Emergency Shelter for at-risk children in Israel and observed that children suffering from insecure attachment due to abuse and/or neglect are often characterized by internal working models that are inappropriate in other relationships and situations. Such children have a higher probability than the general population of becoming abusive or neglectful parents. In addition to the usual goals of psychotherapy, one overall goal is to stop the cycle in which abused children may grow up to be abusive parents. Therapy with these children is complicated by their distrust in adults as well as difficulties in symbolization due to trauma during the preverbal stage. Animal-assisted therapy provides avenues for overcoming these difficulties as well as additional methods for reaching the innermost world of these children.¹⁹

The animals’ assistance is brought into a play setting. The animal figure is not related to the parents, thus allowing the children to work in a safe setting during their

¹⁹Nancy Parish-Plass, “Animal-Assisted Therapy with Children Suffering from Insecure Attachment Due to Abuse and Neglect: A Method to Lower the Risk of Intergenerational Transmission of Abuse,” *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 13 (January 2008): 17-30.

therapy session. Subsequently, children start to trust in their furry fellows and from there they can create new models for a relationship.²⁰

Another study with children was conducted by François Martin and Jennifer Farnum, both from The College of Veterinary Medicine, Washington State University. Their study quantitatively evaluated the effects of interaction of children with pervasive developmental disorders that are characterized by deficiency of social communications with dogs. While interacting with a therapist, children were exposed to three different conditions: (1) a toy, such as a ball; (2) a stuffed dog; and (3) a live therapy dog. Interactions were evaluated in behavioral and verbal aspects. The findings of the study showed that children exhibited a more spirited mood, were more focused, and were more aware of their social environments when playing with a therapy dog.²¹

Sandra Barker, associate professor of psychiatry and internal medicine, and Kathryn Dawson, assistant professor of biostatistics both at the Medical College of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University, conducted a study among 230 psychiatric patients.²² Pre- and post-tests were used to compare the effects of a single animal-assisted therapy session with those of a single regularly scheduled therapeutic recreation session. Before and after participating in the two types of sessions, the patients underwent the

²⁰Ibid.

²¹François Martin and Jennifer Farnum, "Animal-Assisted Therapy for Children with Pervasive Developmental Disorders," abstract, *West Journal of Nursing Research* 24, no. 6 (October 2002): 657-670, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12365766> (accessed May 30, 2008).

²²Sandra B. Barker and Kathryn S. Dawson, "The Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy on Anxiety Ratings of Hospitalized Psychiatric Patients," *Psychiatric Services* 49, no. 6 (June 1998): 797-814, Ps.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/reprint/40/6/797.pdf (accessed September 12, 2011).

State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, a self-report measure of the anxiety they felt at the present time.

Weekly animal-assisted therapy sessions provided the patients with an opportunity to interact with a therapy dog and his owner. During these sessions, the owner talked about the dog and promoted patients' conversations about their own pets while the dog moved around and interacted with them. Therapeutic recreation sessions consisted of meetings where patients received information on how to spend free time and about resources in the community, including music and art activities.

The results of the study showed significant reductions in anxiety after the animal-assisted therapy session for patients with psychotic, mood, and other disorders, and after the therapeutic recreation session for patients with mood disorders. As a conclusion Dr. Barker and Dr. Dawson stated that "animal-assisted therapy was associated with reduced state anxiety levels for hospitalized patients with a variety of psychiatric diagnoses, while a routine therapeutic recreation session was associated with reduced levels only for patients with mood disorders."²³

Katie Cole, Anna Gawlinski, Neil Steers, and Jenny Kotlerman from UCLA Medical Center conducted a study on the effects of animal-assisted therapy in patients hospitalized with heart problems. The purpose of their study was to observe if animal-

²³Ibid.

assisted therapy can improve physiological and psychosocial variables in hypertensive patients.²⁴

Patients with severe heart failure can be very susceptible to many physiological and psychological stressors that provoke the activation of the neuroendocrine cascade as a consequence of the disturbance of the sympathetic nervous system. When there is a chronic neurohormonal condition, the ventricular work experiences alterations that culminate in heart disease or failure. In addition, there is a psychological stress occasioned by living with a chronic, life-threatening illness that often requires hospitalization. Animals can help to improve the life conditions for these patients: “The presence and interaction with animals decreases physiological indices such as heart rate and blood pressure and improves psychosocial variables (e.g., reduces anxiety) in both patients and healthy persons.”²⁵ In patients with heart failure, “the presence of a non-threatening stimulus such as a dog could relax the patient by lowering the patient’s state of arousal and reduce neurohormonal activation caused by over-activity of the sympathetic nervous system.”²⁶

Katie Cole et al.’s study was conducted among 76 adult patients. The participants came together in three groups; the first group received a visit from a volunteer with a therapy dog, the second group received a visit of a volunteer, and the third control group just had regular care from the hospital. Ten variables were observed and measured:

²⁴K. M. Cole et al., “Animal Assisted Therapy in Patients Hospitalized with Heart Failure,” *American Journal of Critical Care* 16 (May 30, 2007): 575-585.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*

(1) blood pressure, (2) heart rate, (3) pulmonary artery pressure, (4) pulmonary capillary wedge pressure, (5) right atrial pressure, (6) cardiac index, (7) systemic vascular resistance, (8) epinephrine level, (9) norepinephrine level, and (10) state of anxiety.

The results of the Cole et al. study revealed the following: Evidence of improved cardiopulmonary pressures, neurohormone levels, and decreased anxiety showed in patients with heart failure who had animal-assisted therapy. Additional information found that “dog ownership is a significant, independent predictor of survival one year after a myocardial infarction; . . . the presence of and interaction with animals decreases heart rate and blood pressure and improves anxiety; . . . Animal-assisted therapy reduced epinephrine and norepinephrine levels, suggesting changes in activation of the autonomic nervous system.”²⁷

The role of companion animals in counseling and psychology has proved to be very effective. Jane K. Wilkes designed and conducted phenomenological interviews with three psychologists who use animals in their therapeutic sessions.²⁸ She used two interview questions:

1. What is your experience of having a companion animal present during sessions with clients?
2. What value, if any, has been derived from the presence of the companion animal?²⁹

The first question allowed Wilkes to have a personal account of the therapist and the second sought the value or lack of value of including animals in the sessions. The

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Jane K. Wilkes, *The Role of Companion Animals in Counseling and Psychology* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2009), 38-75

²⁹Ibid., 50.

study showed that the presence of a companion animal in therapy sessions brings benefits as follows:

1. Improves the trust of the client toward the psychologist in that the animal presence works as an icebreaker during the first sessions allowing the rapport to build.
2. Works as a catalyst for improving the healing process in that the companion animal reduces the amount of sadness and brings hope for most of the clients.
3. Improves the therapeutic environment with the company of an animal bringing a “sense of warmth and safety.”³⁰
4. Stimulates the feeling of unconditional acceptance, thus enhancing the capacity for growing.
5. Provides nurturing; “the animals not only supply nurture, they also teach about nurturing, and provide reciprocity in that they allow the client to nurture.”³¹
6. Supports creativity stimulated by the playful attitude of the companion animal. They also are helpful “at moving clients into activities involving the right brain,”³² such as imagination and use of metaphors.
7. Enhances professional practice since animals can fit in cognitive behavioral therapy. They can illustrate how boundaries work, they model empathy, help clients to relax, and assist the psychologist in teaching different concepts.
8. Provides a sense of well-being in the psychologist. The animals “fed them emotionally and spiritually,” especially those working with their own pets.

³⁰Ibid., 61.

³¹Ibid., 64.

³²Ibid., 67.

9. Creates a sense of sacredness in the psychologist's office. The empathy and sensitivity of the animal companion give this sense, or, in the words of one of the interviewees, the animal "brings the soul to feeling."³³

Wilkes built her theoretical frame on the work of Winnicott, an English pediatrician and psychoanalyst, who was especially influential in the field of object relations theory. She took Winnicott's concept of transitional objects and elaborated on it. The transitional object represents the first possession separated from the individual. The object is there, but it is not part of the child and he/she is able to recognize it as different from him/her. In her literature review, Wilkes found an author, S. L. Triebenbacher, a professor at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC, who considers pets as a transitional object.³⁴

In her personal story, Wilkes reveals her difficult childhood. During that time, dogs served as her emotional support. She writes, "I believe the unconditional love I felt during these times of turmoil was not from my furry friend alone. I believe that the loving presence of a Higher Power used my little animal as a vehicle to bring the support and comfort I needed. Scamper kept me connected to this divine power in moments of utter terror. He kept me connected to life, and in doing so, he kept me connected to the spirit."³⁵

Wilkes's experience reassures me that my hypothesis is true that God's creation, especially animals, can help us to grow spiritually. We can pray or meditate in the

³³Ibid., 74.

³⁴Ibid., 8-37.

³⁵Ibid., 9.

presence of animals and feel connected to God. We can admire the beauty of God in animals. We can experience the love of God through animals. Animals can encourage us to seek God with their unconditional love and sensitivity.

Animals are also considered agents of socialization. During the Age of Enlightenment, in the seventeenth century, people started to change their attitudes toward animals and nature in general. This anthropocentrism gave place to a wider and more inclusive point of view. People started to abandon the myth that animals were threatening. Moreover, they began to notice the benefits of a good relationship with animals. The idea that nurturing relationships with animals might especially help children comes from this time. James A. Serpell cites John Locke, who in 1699 promoted the idea of giving children ““dogs, squirrels, birds, of any such things.””³⁶

The eighteenth century contributed a legacy of theories about the influence of companion animals in socialization, especially among children and mentally ill patients. During this period, the Quakers initiated the use of pet therapy for the mentally ill. In the 1790s at York Hospital, a treatment center for people with emotional illness in Yorkshire, England, the Quakers started bringing pets to assist the patients. Hospitalized people with different diagnoses who had pet therapy decreased their level of anxiety remarkably.³⁷ In

³⁶James A. Serpell, “Animal Companions and Human Well-being: An Historical Exploration of the Value of Human-Animal Relationship,” in *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice*, ed. Aubrey Fine (San Diego: Academic Press, 2008), 12.

³⁷Barker and Dawson, “The Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy,” 797-801.

1859, Florence Nightingale noted “that a small pet is an excellent companion for the sick.”³⁸

By the nineteenth century, companion animals were permitted in hospitals to help patients. Nevertheless, the scientific revolution of that century displaced animals due to the progress of scientific medicine. It was during the second half of the twentieth century that the concept of animal therapy resurged. Different theories of human development pointed out the importance of interaction with nature. Nebbe cited Erickson’s eight stages of human development by highlighting how early experiences with nature help children to be secure in successive stages. For example, a child who is exposed to a furry animal in the first stage will not be afraid of furry animals in further stages. However, if the animal is introduced in stage two, the child will not have the same level of confidence dealing with animals in other stages.³⁹

Piaget’s theory of cognition sustains that children up to seven years old see animals as peers. Teaching children to be kind to animals helps them to be kind to humans.⁴⁰ I remember classmates in elementary school who were cruel to animals, especially kittens and puppies, and those who stoned birds; those children were usually the ones involved in fights.

Linda Nebbe cited several epidemiological studies that support the effects of animals in long-term health. There are also positive effects in short-term health.

³⁸Mary R. Burch, *Volunteering with Your Pet: How to Get Involved in Animal-Assisted Therapy with any Kind of Pet* (New York: Howell Book House, 1996), quoted by Cel Hope, “Therapy Dogs,” <http://www.celhaus.com/therapy.htm> (accessed August 2, 2011).

³⁹Linda Nebbe, “Nature Therapy,” in *Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy*, ed. Fine, 398.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 399.

From a psychological perspective, studies have revealed the importance of the incorporation of animals in therapy. Nebbe includes in her discussion of animal-assisted therapy the following adaptation and expansion of a table originally presented by Dr. James Serpell showing the role of animals in different animal-assisted therapeutic approaches.⁴¹

1. Instrumental therapy—the animals become an extension of the person.
2. Relationship therapy—the person establishes a kind relationship with the animal where the person feels needed and loved.
3. Passive therapy—the person is relaxed by observing the animal.
4. Cognitive therapy—the person uses the information about animals to understand and to relate with respect with others.
5. Spiritual therapy—relationships with animals favor a sense of oneness with creation bringing peace and wellbeing.

Looking at the effects produced by animals in therapeutic situations encourages me to believe that incorporating animals into contemplative practices can benefit personal spiritual growth.

Prayer and Meditation as Means of Personal Growth

An internal and immediate experience of the ultimate, for Christians God, can quench our spiritual need, but this experience can also create the internal changes that we have mentioned. God is willing to enter into a relationship with us through Jesus Christ,

⁴¹Ibid., 403.

the begotten, and the Holy Spirit. By God's grace we start to seek to satisfy our longing for love. "There is a desire within each of us, in the deep center of ourselves that we call our heart . . . Every person on this earth yearns to love, to be loved, to know love. Our true identity, our reason for being, is to be found in this desire," says May.⁴² God is love. Rather than an attribute, love is God's own essence. We yearn for knowing God. By knowing God we mean to experience God and to be able to notice his/her divine presence. Learning to live according to the movements of the presence of God could be considered an "intentional shift to a higher emotional feeling state."⁴³ It would make it possible to reach the fullness of life that the gospel proclaims, "I have come to give life; an abundant life" (Jn. 10:10).

Spending daily time with God is something that all who want to grow spiritually should not neglect. Jesus's example is crucial for our own growth. Harris and Belitsos affirm that "close and frequent communication with the heavenly Father is the secret of the Master's success . . . The master never lured off the true path because he consciously, consistently, by his very thought and deed, dedicated himself to the will of the heavenly Father."⁴⁴

In the Old Testament, King David poetically writes about God's constant presence: "Where I can go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence. If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in hell, behold, you are there. If I take

⁴²Gerald G. May, *The Awakened Heart: Living Beyond Addiction* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1.

⁴³Daugherty, *The Power Within*, 146.

⁴⁴Fred Harris and Byron Belitsos, eds., *The Center Within: Lessons from the Heart of the Urantia Revelation* (Novato, CA: Origin Press, 1998), 86.

the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there your hand will lead me, and your right hand will hold me” (Ps. 139:7-10). King David recognizes God’s omnipresence as attribute, but more than that, as always present with him.

In the New Testament, Matthew, narrating the birth of Jesus the Messiah, cites a prophecy saying, “The virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which translated means, ‘God with us’” (Matt. 1:23). The expression, “God is with us” denotes that it is more than a presence for all and in all; it is a divine presence in individual relationships. In the New Testament the apostle Paul commands the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). Our spiritual life grows in God’s presence and we become more sensitive to God and the divine will.

God’s image is in humankind. God so loved the world that he has given his only son (Jn. 3:16). Looking ahead we find a description of the love of God from the same author. Because “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8), we should love others. Should God’s love in us be limited to our own species? Roberta Bondi sustains that we should have cross-species love. When we do not have love and compassion for nonhuman animals, “we become guilty of several things at once—intellectual arrogance, failure of sympathy with the rest of creation, even profound disrespect for the God we claim watches every sparrow’s fall.”⁴⁵ We can express love to our pets and respect for God’s creation by including them in our sacred time of intimacy with God.

We can experience God’s presence in meditation and prayer. We understand prayer as a form of communication with God. The communication could be verbal or

⁴⁵Roberta Bondi, *Nick the Cat: Christian Reflections on the Stranger* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 23.

nonverbal. Ann and Barry Ulanov state that “prayer starts without words and often ends without them. . . . It works some of the time in signs and symbols.”⁴⁶ However, it starts as a conscious process where our intention to communicate with God is recognized in our innermost being. It is a sacred space where we are honest, we face ourselves, and are transparent in our life before God. The same authors call it “primary speech” since “it is that primordial discourse in which we assert, however clumsily or eloquently, our own being.”⁴⁷ Meditation is a “contemplative reflection or mental exercise designed to bring about a heightened level of spiritual awareness.”⁴⁸

Through meditation and prayer people can bring balance to their bodies and minds. Alane Daugherty explains how two major physiological systems, the autonomous nervous system and the endocrine system, work together in people’s bodies to keep the homeostasis. The autonomous nervous system controls cardiovascular responses, such as heart rate and blood pressure. The endocrine system is responsible for secreting hormones that regulate specific bodily functions.⁴⁹ As referenced earlier, two hormones have opposing effects in people’s bodies: cortisol and oxytocin. Cortisol is “a trigger responsible for a whole cascade of negative effects throughout the body and brain,”⁵⁰ typical in stressful situations. Oxytocin has been also associated with the release of endorphins, chemicals that work in people’s brains in connection with higher emotions.

⁴⁶Ann Ulanov and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), vii.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from A Leading Neuroscientist* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 48.

⁴⁹Daugherty, *The Power Within*, 51.

⁵⁰Ibid., 117.

Oxytocin is segregated when we are in pleasant or relaxing moods, such as in meditation. Daugherty states that “there is absolutely no other activity that I believe leads to higher potential, higher internal development, and higher states of consciousness than meditation.”⁵¹

Meditation and contemplative prayers are spiritual practices that lead us to get focused. This is equivalent to forgetting everything, including workload, concerns, deadlines, sad memories, and conflicts. Bodily, the cortisol is reduced and the level of oxytocin increases.

The attention required by contemplative prayer brings us to our center and to a break with stressfulness. Contemplation of the beauty inside or outside our bodies brings calm, awareness, and happiness, and promotes higher emotions. According to Newberg and Waldman, meditation appears to be more effective than any other technique regarding the strengthening of the neural circuits in our brain. “The more we exercise our brain—mentally, physically, socially and contemplatively—the healthier it becomes.”⁵² Contemplative prayer and meditation, according to Daugherty, can bring the following benefits: (a) Emotional comfort, (2) lower heart rate, (3) lower blood pressure, (4) stimulation of the secretion of oxytocin, (5) strengthening of the immune system, (6) healthier brain, (7) a deeper sense of compassion, (8) decreased stress levels.⁵³

With so many things competing for human attention, more people are looking for forms of believing and practices that focus on the self; Partridge calls these “alternative

⁵¹Ibid., 203.

⁵²Newberg and Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain*, 37, 38.

⁵³Daugherty, *The Power Within*, 55-60.

spiritualities.”⁵⁴ Alternative spiritualities are “a move away from a ‘religion’ that focuses in things that are considered to be external to the self (God, the Bible, the church) to ‘spirituality’ that which focuses on ‘the self’ and is personal and interior.”⁵⁵ But what I am proposing is a spiritually owned growth within the Christian faith that focuses on the internal experience of God in partnership with nature and specifically with animals. It is spiritual growth by exercising contemplative spiritual practices personalized by sharing time in God’s presence with our pets or any animal. There are spiritualities in the Christian tradition, mainly in the mystical movements, focused on the inner experience. Therefore, I am promoting that we experience God’s presence, the divine realm, in our inner selves with a nonhuman companion. I do not want to use the term “assisted” in relation to animals because of its connotation of using animals. I do not mean we are using them for our own benefit, but we are interacting with the animals for mutual benefit. We provide quality time to the animals and send a strong message of their importance in God’s eyes and our responsibility of caring for them while we cultivate our own spirituality and compassion through prayer and meditation with them.

⁵⁴Christopher Partridge, “Introduction,” in *New Religions: A Guide, New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities*, ed. Christopher Partridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16, 17.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 17.

CHAPTER 4

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO SPIRITUALITY:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG
THEOLOGY, ETHICS, AND SPIRITUALITY

Theology

Born in 1943, J. R. Hyland was an ordained evangelical minister who once served in the Air Force. Raised as a Roman Catholic, she worked for the diocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Virginian*. Later she became member of the Assemblies of God and worked with prisoners in Texas and with migrant farm workers in Southwest Florida. She actively supported issues of female equality and animal rights, working with different animal rights groups throughout the country. She studied theology and was ordained as a nondenominational minister in 1984. She founded Viatoris Ministries in Sarasota as part of the International Ministerial Fellowship, an association of independent Christian ministries. For several years, Rev. Hyland published *Humane Religion*, a bimonthly journal, and contributed numerous articles to religious periodicals. J. R. Hyland died in 2007.¹

Hyland's book, *God's Covenant with Animals*, is an appeal to treat animals as God has planned for them to be treated, with respect and love as for the rest of creation. We should treat nonhuman animals following, as Albert Schweitzer states, "the commandment of love contained in our hearts and thought, and proclaimed by Jesus, to give rein to our natural sympathy for animals. We are also compelled to help them and

¹Grace Kao, lecture in a course on Animal Theology and Ethics Rethinking Human-Animal Relationships at Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, October 12, 2011.

spare them suffering.”² Our relationship with animals should be in the context of love and respect for God’s creation. We should keep animals in the position that God has given to them. Animals were appointed to live in harmony with humankind. They coexisted peacefully in the Garden of Eden. Hyland asserted that “the abuse of animal-like oppression of human beings—is opposed to the way of life that God has ordained.”³

In her study of the book of Genesis, Hyland found that humans and nonhumans were created as nonviolent creatures, with a natural tendency to kindness. Hyland considered that “both humans and animals were created as extensions of God’s love and goodness.”⁴ Rolston Holmes III pointed out that God is for both humans and nonhumans. In his work, “Does Nature Need to be Redeemed,” He cites the Bible: “Who has let the wild ass go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass, to whom I have given the steppe for his home, and the salt land for his dwelling place? He scorns the tumult of the city; he hears not the shouts of the driver. He ranges the mountain as his pasture, and he searches after every green thing” (Job 39:5-8). Holmes argued that, according to this passage, “God is not for us humans alone done. God is for these wild creatures too. God loves wildness as well as God loves culture, and in this love God both blesses and satisfies wildness and also leaves it to its own spontaneous autonomy.”⁵

²Albert Schweitzer, quoted in J. R. Hyland, *God’s Covenant with Animals: A Biblical Basis for the Humane Treatment of All Creatures* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000), xiii.

³Hyland, *God’s Covenant with Animals*, 2.

⁴Ibid., 16.

⁵Rolston Holmes III, “Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?” *Zygon* 29, no. 2 (June 1994): 210.

Humans and nonhumans lived harmoniously with their own and different species. The world was a paradise where Adam and Eve were “loving and trusted caregivers” for the animals with whom they shared their life.⁶ This peaceful coexistence was disturbed by Adam and Eve’s fall. Violence in animals is a consequence of the fall: “Because humans were their leaders, the animals reflected their fall from a higher state.”⁷ Nevertheless, Hyland insists, animals can be readapted to the higher state, as well as humans, and live in peace again as it was at the beginning.

While Hyland speaks of readaptation, Rolston talks about redemption. Nature needs to be redeemed from predation, parasitism, disaster, suffering, and death. Hyland agrees with Rolston that after Adam and Eve’s fall, creation deteriorated, giving place to predation. The absence of pain was shifted and suffering emerged. It would be a kind of redemption for nature. Hyland said, “Because humans were their leaders, the animals reflected their fall from a higher state.”⁸ Hyland brings the biblical prophecy about the wolf being together with the lamb and the lion eating grass (Is. 65:25), indicating that there is hope for readaptation and for recovering the peaceable kingdom portrayed in Genesis 1.

We can live together in harmony with animals, as in paradise, caring for them, and including them in our spiritual development. According to the Bible, animals were created as Adam’s companions. Hyland adds that animals were “formed like [Adam],

⁶Ibid., 17.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 74.

from the ground, they were like him in their spiritual essence. They, too, were endowed with God-giving souls.”⁹

The human being, as “loving and trusted caregiver” is accountable for animal welfare before the Creator. To illustrate this point, Hyland brought the task assigned to Noah of building a shelter for his family and several animals to survive the flood. God specifically gave Noah instructions of bringing in “his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives [to] the ark to escape the waters of the flood. Pairs of clean and unclean animals and of all creatures . . . came to Noah and entered the ark” (Gen. 7:7-9).

God gave provision for animals’ wellness. One of the Ten Commandments instructs to provide sabbat for animals as well for humans (Ex. 20:10)

Animal abuse is prohibited in the Bible. There are many passages that not only ban animal cruelty but also promote compassion to them. I will cite two: “But you shall not slaughter, from the herd or the flock, an animal with its young on the same day” (Lev. 22: 28), and “When you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free” (Ex. 23: 4, 5).

The prophets describe a future return to a peaceable kingdom where humans and animals, wild and tame, will live together in accord. In Hos. 2:18 we read: “I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping

⁹Ibid.

things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety.” Is. 11:6-9 says:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Lastly, Is. 65:25 proclaims that “the wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”

Saint Francis was born at Assisi in Umbria in 1181 or 1182. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant and his mother belonged to a noble family. Francis studied with the priests of St. George’s at Assisi and from there went to the school of the Troubadours in Italy, where he learned more.

In his youth, Francis enjoyed the affluence of his father and the nobility of his mother. He lived a life of pleasure. When he was about twenty years old, Francis went to war fighting against the city of Perugia. He was taken prisoner by the Perugians who had won the war. During his year in prison, Francis experienced an illness that made him believe God had given him “a yearning for the life of the spirit that had already possessed it.”¹⁰ By the year 1208, Francis finally realized his divine call to serve God and the poor, while hearing a mass in the chapel of St. Mary of the Angels. He gave up all of his

¹⁰Paschal Robinson, “St. Francis of Assisi,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06221a.htm> (accessed October 11, 2011).

possessions, including his shoes, clothes, and his wallet and wore a tunic like those worn by the poorest people. Then, Francis started his ministry exhorting the people of the countryside to repent, love, and to foment peace. People of all social and economic statuses started to join him. With approval from Rome, Francis and his companion left Assisi to preach. Upon their return to the town of Assisi, they found a shelter in a valley close to the town. By 1211 the Franciscan Convent was formed.

During the last years of his life Francis became blind but never discouraged. He refers to this blindness as “holy” since he had the opportunity to spend more time in solitude with God where received several revelations in his mystical experiences. On the eve of his death, he served communion to those who were with him and blessed them. As if he was feeling the call of God to leave this world, “Francis removed his habit and lay down on the ground, covered with a borrowed cloth, rejoicing that he was able to keep faith with his poverty.”¹¹ He died on October 3, 1226.

Francis was a passionate Christ follower. His sensitivity led him to celebrate life in all its manifestations. John Michael Talbot and Steve Rabey in their book, *The Lessons of Saint Francis*, include an anecdote of Saint Francis. On Christmas Eve, in the year 1223, Saint Francis went to a stable to celebrate Christmas. People in the town of Greccio were curious for knowing what he was doing there. There, in the manger, was a baby wrapped in modest pieces of cloth, surrounded by cows and sheep. Saint Francis was

¹¹Ibid.

there adoring the baby who represented Jesus.¹² His passion for Jesus was shown in many different ways, some of them very childlike, others more mature.

Saint Francis was very compassionate. He loved God and he loved people; he loved animals and creation in general. He expressed his love through compassion. He had compassion for the poor, the lepers, the environment, the birds, the wolf, the fishes, and all kinds of animals. He took care of them. He contemplated God through them. He prayed with the poor and the sick, as well in the midst of nature in the presence of animals. We can assume that he was inspired by these creatures, and other elements of nature, to pray and meditate. But today we are far away from the purity of the environment, of the kindness toward animals, and perhaps of the empathy with the poor and the sick. Talbot and Rabey express this reality, “But it seemed that religion merely baptized consumerism, legitimized humanity’s dominion over nature, and fueled the mindless exploitation of creation.”¹³ Many times we help the needy and the sick from a distance; many of the churches prepare bags of food and send them out as well as sending medicine to other countries. What about animals? We care for our pets but let the shelters euthanize thousands of homeless animals. Saint Francis was an animals’ advocate, a defender of them. He requested on countless occasions for the government officials to pass laws to protect animals from cruelty. Saint Francis articulated:

If I could talk to the emperor, I would beg him, for the love of God, to grant my prayer and to publish an edict forbidding anyone from trapping our

¹²John Michael Talbot and Steve Rabey, *The Lessons of St. Francis: How to Bring Simplicity and Spirituality into your Daily Life* (New York: Plume, 1997), 37.

¹³Ibid., 168.

sisters the larks or from inflicting any harm on them. Furthermore . . . all the lords of castles and of villages ought to oblige their subjects every year on the day of the Nativity of the Lord to throw wheat or other grain on the roads [so that] the birds and especially our sisters the larks would have food . . . and that everyone be obliged to give our brothers the oxen and the asses a generous amount of feed.¹⁴

Saint Francis saw all of creation as a part of God's family. To respect and to care for them was a way of worshiping God. Saint Francis' life "was punctuated by rapturous celebrations of the joys of creation and ceaseless efforts to protect all creatures from suffering or harm."¹⁵

Saint Francis was a great preacher. He preached in mass and in the midst of nature; he preached to people but also to birds. Actually, one of his most famous sermons was preached to the birds:

My brothers, birds, you should praise your creator very much and always love him; he gave you feathers to clothe you, wings so that you can fly, and whatever else was necessary for you. God made you noble among his creatures, and he gave you a home in the purity of the air; though you neither sow nor reap, he nevertheless protects and governs you without any solicitude on your part.¹⁶

By calling the natural elements brothers and sisters, Saint Francis puts not only some elements but also all of nature, including animals, at the same level as humans. Sun and moon, humans and nonhuman beings have been created by God. In his *Canticle of the Creatures*, this fact is emphasized. He composed this canticle in stages; each one shows a piece of Saint Francis' vision of God. The first part, verses 1–9, the saint praises the creation with the intention of glorifying the creator. Suffering from his infirmities, he

¹⁴Ibid., 173.

¹⁵Ibid., 174.

¹⁶Ibid., 169.

said, "I wish to compose a new hymn about the Lord's creatures, of which we make daily use, without we cannot live, and which the human race greatly offends its Creator."¹⁷

Most high, all-powerful, all good Lord!
 All praise is yours, all glory, all honors
 And blessing.
 To you, alone, Most High, do they belong.
 To pronounce your name.
 All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you made,
 And first my lord Brother Sun,
 Who brings the day; and light you to give to us through him.
 How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendor!
 Oh you, Most High, he bears the likeness.
 All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon
 And stars;
 In the heavens you have made them, bright
 And precious and fair.
 All praise be yours, my Lord through Brothers
 Wind and Air,
 And fair and stormy, all the weather's moods,
 By which you cherish all that you have made.
 All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,
 So useful, lowly, precious and pure.
 All praise be yours, my Lord through Brother Fire,
 Through whom you brighten up the night.
 How beautiful is he, how great! Full of power
 And strength.
 All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister
 Earth, our mother,
 Who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces
 Various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.
 All praise be yours, my Lord, through those
 Who grant pardon
 For love you; through those who endure
 Sickness and trial.
 Happy those who endure in peace,
 By you, Most High, they will be crowned.
 All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Death,
 From whose embrace no mortal can escape.

¹⁷Francis of Assisi, "Canticle of the Creatures," in *The Saint*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), 113.

Woe to those whose die in mortal sin!
 Happy those she finds doing your will!
 The second death can do no harm to them.
 Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks
 And serve him with great humility.¹⁸

He recognized the difference between humans and nonhuman animals and he didn't pretend that nature has the same characteristics as humans, but "he exhorted all of creation to follow God."¹⁹ His relationship with God included creation. Animals were peers in praising the Lord and in meditation in the midst of nature.

How could people mistreat animals? Saint Francis was disturbed by the suffering inflicted on them. One day he asked one merchant, "Why are torturing my brother lambs tied up and hanging like this?"²⁰ He and his friars often bought animals at the market and gave them away in adoption.

Although he cared for nature and expected the same from Christians, he was not a pantheist. He was an orthodox monotheist who recognized that God and nature were separate. He conceived God as the one who is first over everything else and will exist forever. He saw God as the one who is holy. His theology is deep-rooted in the Scriptures. The study of the Scriptures characterized the religious life in the Middle Ages. Saint Francis was a devoted student of the Scriptures. Edward Prenga affirms, "Nel caso di Francesco, piu che di un influsso esteriore, dobbiamo parlare di un atteggiamento

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., 177.

²⁰Ibid., 176.

originale che accompagna sistematicamente il suo rapporto con la Scrittura.”²¹ Saint Francis read the Bible and internalized its content and scenes, via sentiments. God’s words were in his inner being and from there he molded his life and the Franciscan order, leading them to practice the Bible’s teachings. Paul Sabatier points out that “La connaissance que saint François a de la Bible est à la fois pratique et sentimentale. *Il voit les idées, plus que les mots et les personnages plus que les idées.*”²²

Saint Francis wanted to follow Jesus’ example in the Evangelists. José Rodríguez Carballo, writing about the authenticity of his Christian life, says, “[Saint Francis] quiere seguir a Jesús, ha quedado fascinado por el Evangelio, no quiere repetir los moldes de la vida religiosa de su tiempo. Quiere vivir la pasión por el Señor, . . . quiere quedar admirado por las obras de la creación, . . . quiere quedar totalmente desnudo y pobre y no tener más riqueza que Cristo pobre y crucificado.”²³

In Saint Francis’ life, prayer and meditation were nurturing experiences. Francis and Jesus have something in common; both of them spent hours in prayer and solitude. Talbot and Ravey say, “Both drew strength from intense periods of spiritual isolation prior to engaging in tireless and selfless work in the world.”²⁴ Saint Francis knew the value of spending time in solitude. He knew the importance of being in God’s presence alone. Solitude is a way of taking a break from the busy life to be in communion with

²¹Eduard Prenga, *Il Crocifisso via alla Trinità: l’esperienza di Francesco d’Assisi nella teologia di Bonaventura* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2009), 125.

²²Paul Sabatier, *Études inédites sur S. François d’Assise* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1932), 55.

²³Jose Rodríguez Carballo, *Francisco de Asis y la vida religiosa* (Madrid: PPC, 2009), 15.

²⁴Talbot and Rabey, *The Lessons of St. Francis*, 236.

God, to renew our spirit, and to get peace for our soul. It is also to rest in the Lord which helps to handle our tensions. "Solitude, silence, and emptiness help us to connect with God," affirm Talbot and Rabey, "Intimacy with God becomes a prelude to intimacy with and service to others."²⁵ Time of solitude with God doesn't mean total separation from the world. As Saint Francis did, we must conserve a balance; a balance among solitude and our ministry, daily duties such as work and social life.

Prayer and meditation in solitude benefit us in terms of "knowing ourselves better . . . knowing God better, . . . and knowing our purpose better."²⁶ In addition, it is a means to grow spiritually. It is an opportunity of learning to love God and his/her creatures and become ecologically responsible. In solitude we can reveal ourselves to God and allow him/her to work in what the Lord has perceived as needs to be improved in us.

The contemplative life of Saint Francis can be a model for us. He found time to be connected with God in prayer and meditation. Often, he chose natural sceneries to be in connection with God. It could be in the country or in the patio of the monastery; it could be close to a river or on a dry piece of land. Sheep, cattle, wolves, birds, and squirrels were part of the scenery. The living nature motivated him to praise and glorify God.

The saint knew that solitude doesn't happen just because we know it is good for us, for our spirit. He worked to create a habit of stopping his busy life and just seeking God. We must schedule those times as well as we schedule time to exercise, eat, and

²⁵Ibid., 62.

²⁶Ibid., 63.

work. We must create a discipline to practice solitude. Father Andrew says, “The soul that is growing in holiness is the least lonely when it is more alone.”²⁷

Dorothee Soelle was a German theologian, political activist, and feminist. She was born September 30, 1929, in Cologne, West Germany, to a middle-class Protestant family. Soelle became interested in the church and theology as a high school student. She studied philology, philosophy, theology, and German literature.

Soelle defines mysticism as the “Cognitio Dei Experimentalis.” We can know God through experience. It is in mystical experience that we connect with God and can transform the sinful reality. God can be experienced through nature; and nature must be protected from human destruction. Her work could be considered an eco/political-feminist call for cultivating our spirituality by a direct, personal-social, and creative relationship to God, where nature plays an important role.²⁸

Dorothee Soelle believes that we encounter God in a mystical experience. Mysticism for her was not an exoteric experience, an experience for a few selected people. Mysticism is a privilege for all human beings. Every individual can experience God’s presence in a mystical state. We can connect with God and be astonished by his/her manifestation in numerous ways, among them nature.

As a theologian and activist, Soelle rather referred to nature in general than to animals in particular. She advocated for the conservation of the environment, for keeping

²⁷Ibid., 72.

²⁸“Dorothee Soelle,” *Gale Encyclopedia of Biographies*, Answers Corporation, 2006, <http://www.answers.com/topic/dorothee-soelle> (accessed October 4, 2011).

the forests, and for stopping the devastation of the jungles. However, understanding her background we can assume that animals also deserve caring for as a part of nature.

Regarding to mystical experience, Soelle recognizes three stages in it: “to be amazed, to let go, and to resist.”²⁹ To be amazed is to realize that the “veil of triviality” has fallen apart and we can see the scene from a new perspective that shows its beauty. The author affirms, “Without this overwhelming amazement in the face of what encounters us in nature . . . , without beauty experienced even on a busy street . . . there is not a mystical way that can lead to union.”³⁰ We can incorporate animals into this portrait, a bird that sings in a tree, a stray cat or a lost dog on the street, a pet walked on a leash. Amazement is to see the ordinary picture of vegetation, animals, rocks and stones, even busy streets as paradises. The dirty and aggressive stray cat and the starved, lost dog are seen as the most beautiful of God’s creatures that bring joy and hope to our spirit. The green or yellow trees are pieces of art. The beauty of a rustic rock or the shapes of the stones close to a river are precious designs of the Creator, Soelle asserted that in Genesis 1, we find the narration of the creation where the animals as well as the earth and the waters were there before God created the human being.³¹ For her this is a call to live in togetherness with creation.

Pam, a church administrator and participant in the six-week study, went on a vacation to Leucadia on the Pacific Ocean. While walking in the beach, she was amazed

²⁹Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry, Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 89.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 90.

³¹Dorothee Soelle, *Essential Writings*, ed. Diana L. Oliver (New York: Orbis, 2006), 144.

at seeing a group of pelicans together as a community. While Pam was observing these birds and meditating, she felt a part of this community of birds. For an instant she experienced the togetherness with these precious creatures and was inspired to reflect. To respond to the sacred call that Soelle mentions, we must learn to take care for animals and the mentioned elements of the world. Compassion will lead us to modify actions toward animals, which are sentient beings.

Soelle sees amazement as “a way of praising God, even if God’s name is not mentioned.”³² She considers that amazement leads us to join heaven and to declare God’s glory (Ps. 19:1). It is like we ourselves are lost in God and God is lost in us.

The second stage of mystical experience is letting go. We have gained a new insight in the amazement, we have seen God’s aesthetic point of view, and we have reached oneness with God. Now we are ready for letting go. Letting go refers to the disengagement with consumerism and materialism. “We need purification (purgation) both in the coercive mechanism of consumption and in the additions of the everyday working world,” says Soelle.³³ “We must let go of our wrong longings and needs,” asserted the author “to being apart,”³⁴ and before we can be transformed to Christ’s image as the Bible says.

Soelle considered the stage of letting go the “dark night” because we must renounce greed, violence, and ego. At the same time we are missing God in our mystical

³²Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 89.

³³Ibid., 92.

³⁴Ibid.

journey, to be surrendered “into the hands of principalities and powers that dominate us.”³⁵ But it is necessary to experience the surrender to the forces of evil in order to renounce them, to become free. The author upheld that “to praise God and to miss nothing so much as God leads us to a ‘life in God’ that the tradition calls *via unitiva*.”³⁶ In the dark night we grasp that we cannot live without God.

The third stage is to resist. The resistance is in regard to evil, to the principalities and powers that come in waves like a disrespect for God’s creation, the appropriateness of it, contamination, animal abuse, and deforestation, lack of compassion toward our fellow man, and injustice toward them. It is in this stage of healing that we are transformed by agents of God’s healing power, and we become one with God, a fact which I see as a sacred togetherness. Soelle states, “Perhaps the most powerful symbol of this mystical oneness is the rainbow, which is the sign of creation that does not perish but continues to live in sowing and harvesting, day and night, summer and winter, birth and death.”³⁷ As a result of what we experience in this stage, we recognize that we cannot live alone, we cannot live as isolated beings. We live with other beings, and as Buddhist wisdom explains, “What I am, they are also; what they are, I am also: when one makes oneself thus equal with the other, one does not wish to kill or permit killing.”³⁸ The peace acquired in a mystical experience leads us to live in peaceful relationship with others,

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., 93.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Dorothee Soelle and Perry Schmid-Leukel, “Das Problem von Gewalt und Kried in der buddhistischen Etik,” *Dialog der Religionen* 6, no. 2 (1996): 129.

including animals. A peaceful relationship with animals is critical to including them into contemplative practices.

Ethics

Stephen H. Webb, contemporary philosopher and ethicist, was born in 1961. He is known for his scholarship and journalism on animals and vegetarianism. He is the cofounder of the Christian Vegetarian Association, although he has admitted to eating meat occasionally, declarations that cost him his position in the association. He defends the value of animals by restating traditional concepts of human distinctiveness and its responsibility for nature. Usually his arguments about animal rights are influenced by a razing of the differences between humans and animals as well as the differences between God and the world.

In his work, *Good Eating*, Webb wrote about vegetarianism. In the development of this topic, the author described the animal-human and animal-God relationship. He pointed out that Christianity is an historical religion whose roots go back to Judaism. Christianity takes time very seriously. Christians are not interested in recovering what is gone, such as the Garden of Eden, but they look toward the future. The Garden of Eden was created by God showing us his/her intentions of good relationships with other beings, with peace and love instead of violence. As Christians, we do not remember the story of

creation with nostalgia; we look for what God was doing to accomplish her/his purpose regarding this kind of peaceable relationship.³⁹

In his review of the book of Genesis, Webb stated that God gave authority to men over animals but “power and authority is most clearly illustrated in the self-sacrificial life of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁰ The authority that humankind has over animals is an authority entrusted by God to lovingly take care of animals who have been created by God on the same day with man. Webb quoted Carl Barth who wrote, “Man is not [animal’s] Creator; hence he cannot be their absolute lord, a second god.”⁴¹ Then, the power entrusted by God in man and woman is not a power for destroying but a creative power oriented to serve and care for nature.

Adam was commanded by God to name the animals. The Bible is not clear if Adam named each animal of each species. However, as I said before, it is clear that naming the animals in the garden brought a closer relationship between Adam and the animals. This closeness could be considered as proof of the similarities between humans and animals. I remember years ago I had a bad flu and Romualdo, my cat, spent all day in bed with me. I was afraid I was contagious to my lovely kitty. Then, I called my mom and shared my fears. With all of her sweetness she answered: “I really don’t know, but perhaps it won’t affect him because Romualdo is another kind of animal.” For her, the difference between humans and animals is a matter of species.

³⁹Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 61–67.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 63.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 64.

Webb conveys that we live in a fallen world. Man has turned against animals and vice versa. It seems that in the Garden of Eden animals were tame, but today there are wild animals created by God, with the same value and beauty of the tamed ones. In the category of tamed animals are our pets. In training them, we do not impose our will or try to change the nature of the animal, but we do train them to live in harmony with us. With our pets we can perform an enormous number of things that benefit them as well as us. Among a number of things is the possibility of being cohorts in meditation and prayer.

Numerous Christians around the world do not relate animals with the Christian responsibility of loving and caring for them. Most people do not realize that animals can be included in religious practices, such as meditation and prayer. Except for the pets, they consider animals as living objects to satisfy their needs. People see them as food, as entertainment like fishing and hunting, and as a species completely different and lower than us. As Peter Singer states that there exists a prejudice that he denominates “specieism,” which is an “attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those members of other species.”⁴² People can’t understand that animals are sentient beings like we are. They can experience pain. Webb states that “some animals, presumably, can experience that pain in ways that are not totally dissimilar to our own.”⁴³ They also grieve over separation. Last winter I visited my sister in her country vacation house. I was in the patio and I heard a cow crying. Curious about

⁴²Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 6.

⁴³Stephen H. Webb, *The Dome of Eden: A New Solution to the Problem of Creation and Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 296.

this constant crying, I went to see the cow. She was running next to a fence from one place to the other in desperation. My brother-in-law thought she had jumped the fence and didn't know how to get back to her place; later he found out that the cow was looking for her son who had been sold. I cried over the situation of this cow and her baby; I prayed for them, asking the Lord to reunite them again. In the evening, my brother-in-law said to me, "God has listened to your prayer." The neighbor had decided to take the little cows back because he was afraid the mom would jump the fence and get hurt, which meant he would lose money. I was so happy and grateful to God for his answer to my prayer. How far from following biblical examples on treating animals we are. Webb articulates that in the Bible, especially in the Hebrew Bible, there are rules for the treatment of animals. Webb sustained that "the Bible treats animals as others who are really different and yet similar enough to merit kindness and to be included in God's plan for the world."⁴⁴ Job talks about animal power with the purpose of "humbl[ing] the human heart and enlarging our understanding of God's majesty. They are meant to leave us trusting that God is in charge of nature and thus nature has a purpose, no matter how purposeless it seems."⁴⁵

Moral concern regarding animals is expressed by Webb regarding pets and animals in general. It is easy to apply the universal moral requirements, such as providing shelter, food, and keeping them away from pain. Our cats, dogs, and hamsters deserve

⁴⁴Stephen H. Webb, *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 21.

⁴⁵Webb, *Dome of Eden*, 311.

love and care; but the cats, dogs, and hamsters that belong to others receive less love and care than ours. When we try to apply the same moral standards that we use for our pets to all animals, it is more difficult, as difficult as it is to think in terms of “one’s own children [and] all children.”⁴⁶

According to Webb, theologians are more concerned in “defend[ing] the particularity of revelation, the covenant, and the church within the framework of God’s universal providence,”⁴⁷ than making a small effort to explain the animals within the framework of God’s universal providence. Animals are created by God and God provides for them among other graces. Grace is indispensable for identification with the pain of other humans and nonhuman beings. God identifies with our pain through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ “took on the suffering of the world in a death often referred to as bestial and animal-like; he was tortured for no good reason at all and reduced to empty flesh; treated, that is, like an animal.”⁴⁸ If the sacrificial suffering of Jesus Christ has taken on the suffering of the world, animals should be included in the benefits of the crucifixion. We, as humans who have been given different qualities from animals, such as language, should be instruments to diminish pain in all animals and not only in our pets.

I visited one of my parishioners because one of her pets, Muffin, had been hurt by her dog. We prayed for the rat and we put some antibiotic cream on her cuts. Should we do the same with other rats? As God’s agents, we are responsible for preventing the

⁴⁶Ibid., 109.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., 111.

suffering of any animal. Taking care of all beings is not a matter of sympathy, it is a moral issue.

It is essential for us as Christians to read again and again the story of creation, to understand why God created animals, but knowing why is not more essential than knowing what God feels for animals. Then, as Webb intended, to encourage us to reflect and think about the way we should love and treat animals.⁴⁹

⁴⁹Ibid., 113.

CHAPTER 5

NEW PARADIGMS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION: A
PROPOSAL FOR THE INTEGRATION OF ANIMALS
INTO CONTEMPLATIVE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

I intend to create new paradigms for spiritual formation through the inclusion of animals into contemplative practices. The practitioner would get triple benefits: physical, psychological, and spiritual, while at the same time animals would enjoy qualitative time with their loved ones. The practitioner also can feel motivated to spend more time in prayer and meditation.

Spiritual Practices

The core operating principle for these new paradigms is that spirituality is the connection with God; a connection that brings us peace, urges us to serve the community, and encourages us to live a contemplative life. Our spirit yearns for a relationship with the ultimate, for an internal and immediate experience of God. The gracious God is willing to enter into a relationship with us through Jesus Christ, the begotten, and the Holy Spirit. By God's grace we start to seek for satisfying our longing for love. "There is a desire within each of us, in the deep center of ourselves that we call our heart. . . . Every person on this earth yearns to love, to be loved, to know love. Our true identity, our reason for being, is to be found in this desire," says Gerald May.¹ We know that God is love. Rather than an attribute, love is God's own essence. We yearn to know God. By

¹Gerald G. May, *The Awakened Heart: Living Beyond Addiction* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1.

knowing God I mean to experience God and to be able to recognize the divine presence in everything and everywhere. God is expressed in the world that he created. The *ruah* is in constant activity around the world “creating new life, working to sustain it in myriad ways, renewing what has been damaged, grieving over destruction, teaching people to be wise.”² The *shekinah*, the spirit of God “is the divine glory or *kabod*, the weighty radiance that flashes out in unexpected ways in the midst of the broken world.”³ Breathing through our experience, God’s breath of life brings us vitality.

Learning to live according to the movements of the presence of God in this world will make it possible to reach the fullness of life. This fullness of life, the abundant life provided by God and proclaimed by Jesus Christ in the Gospels (John 10:10) is a life of freedom, creativity, and compassion. This kind of life is the fondest wish of every human being.

Contemplative Practices’ Psychological and Physiological Effects

By focusing our attention in the moment and being mindful, we can bring balance to both body and mind. Dr. Daugherty states, “Our bodies, minds, and souls, are a holistic unit.”⁴ In the same book she explains how two major physiological systems work together in our bodies. They are responsible for keeping the balance, the homeostasis. They are the autonomous nervous system and the endocrine system. The autonomous

²Ibid., 86.

³Ibid., 87.

⁴Alane Daugherty, *The Power Within: From Neuroscience to Transformation* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 2007), 29.

nervous system controls cardiovascular responses, such as heart rate and blood pressure. The endocrine system is responsible for secreting hormones that regulate specific bodily functions.⁵ As previously described, two hormones have opposing effects in our bodies: cortisol and oxytocin. Cortisol is “a trigger responsible for a whole cascade of negative effects throughout the body and brain,”⁶ typical on stressful situations. Oxytocin activates the calm and connection system. Indirectly, it has been also associated with the release of endorphins, chemicals that work in our brains in connection with higher emotions. Oxytocin is segregated when we are in pleasant or relaxing moods such as meditation.

Contemplative prayers are spiritual practices that lead us to focus on the experience of the ultimate. This is equivalent to forgetting workload concerns, deadlines, sad memories, and conflicts, just to mention a few. Bodily, the cortisol, the hormone activated during stress, is reduced and the level of oxytocin increases.

Doc Childre comments that it troubled him “that people had trouble bringing insights gained from prayer or meditation into everyday life. . . . The trouble wasn’t with prayer; it was with the emotional state of the people who practiced it.”⁷ For the author, Heart-Lock-In is the answer. He feels that we must practice Heart-Lock-In, a “technique used to go deeper in the heart to explore the richer textures and expanded awareness that reside there.”⁸ That could be in relation with a Mindful Meditation. The attention required by this kind of meditation brings us to our center, to a break with stressfulness.

⁵Ibid., 51.

⁶Ibid., 117.

⁷Doc Childre and Howard Martin, *The HearthMath Solution* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 215.

⁸Ibid., 213.

Contemplation of the beauty inside or outside our bodies brings calm, awareness, happiness, and promotes higher emotions.

When including animals in spiritual practices, such as contemplative practices, the positive effects in the life of those who pray or meditate are enormous. Levels of pressure come down while being with companion animals as discussed in Chapter 2. The level of confidence rises up with their help. Positive emotions are stimulated by companion animals.

According to Newberg and Waldman, meditation appears to be more effective than any other technique regarding strengthening the neural circuits in our brain. They stated, “The more we exercise our brain—mentally, physically, socially and contemplatively—the healthier it becomes.”⁹ Meditation then, brings the following benefits: (1) emotional comfort, (2) lower heart rate, (3) lower blood pressure, (4) stimulate the secretion of oxytocin, (5) strengthen our immune system, (6) make our brain healthier, (7) develop a deeper sense of compassion, and (8) decrease stress levels.

I have chosen four contemplative practices: Mindfulness, Walking Prayer, Practicing the Presence of God, and Ignatian Prayer to work on each one. I am proposing to add a new constituent to the traditional practices, through the incorporation of animals.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness consists of being aware of the present moment. Daniel J. Siegel explains that Mindfulness, “In its more general sense is about waking up from a life

⁹Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 37, 38.

automatic, and being sensitive to novelty in our everyday experience.”¹⁰ In a research of mindful learning E. J. Langer suggests that mindful “consists of openness to novelty; alertness to distinction; sensitivity to different contexts; implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives; and orientation to the present.”¹¹ For Kabat-Zinn, Mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.”¹²

The whole body is involved in living in the present moment. It is keeping conscious, aware, and attending to things the way they are. Buddhist Mindfulness, as Dr. Dreitcer describes it, is a state that involves the process of four foundations: (a) contemplate the body as the body, without analyzing; (b) contemplate the feelings as feelings; (c) contemplate consciousness as consciousness, just being aware of what is going around without looking for an explanation; (d) contemplating mental objects as mental objects.¹³ The four foundations are related with Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness definition. We pay attention intentionally, nonjudgmentally to the “unfolding of experience moment by moment.” Mindfulness is living the present. It is practice of

¹⁰Daniel J. Siegel, *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 5.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 7.

¹²*Ibid.*, 10.

¹³Andrew Dreitcer, “Mindful Meditation,” Lecture on Advanced Seminar on Spiritual Formation. Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, April 12, 2008.

letting go to live the moment. It is a way of detaching from ideas, of suppression of reasoning to experience tranquility and equanimity.¹⁴

Mindful Meditation is a contemplative practice where the practitioners are focused in contemplating things as they are, without streaking them with their emotions or knowledge. Nhat Hanh states, “The technique . . . lies in two things—watching and letting go: watching your breath, and letting go of everything else.”¹⁵

Mindful Meditation is also practiced among Christians. According to John Main, Christian meditation “is the process which we take time to allow ourselves to become aware of our infinite potential in the context of Christ-event.”¹⁶ In meditation we encounter ourselves and encounter God. We don’t reject ourselves, we are not judgmental because we embrace God’s love and love ourselves.

Christian meditation adopts different forms. One is mindful prayer, which consists in facilitating the awareness of God’s constant presence in our life by praying. Embodying the awareness of such presence affects what we do and how we live.

Another form of Christian meditation is to be mindful on what we are doing and seeing, such as eating a fruit, cleaning, or petting an animal. We live in the present moment. When eating a fruit we must focus our attention on its color, texture, form, and taste, in how we bring it to the mouth, the noise while chewing it, and the passage for our

¹⁴Siegel, *The Mindful Brain*, 3-28.

¹⁵Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*, trans. Mobi Hu (Berkeley: Beacon Press, 1999), 35.

¹⁶John Main, *Word Into Silence: A Manual for Christian Meditation*, ed. Laurence Freeman (London: Canterbury Press, 2006), 4.

throat. While petting a cat or a parrot we must be aware of the beauty of his/her fur or feathers. We observe the designs on their fur or feathers, the precision of the lines traced on them, and their softness and gracefulness. We notice particular smells, such as how kittens smell different from grown cats. You can perceive the odor of mother's milk or formula in their mouth while in grown cats you will get the scent of meat, perspiration, and grease aromas from the coat, certainly not less attractive than the kitten's scent. In the case of birds, you can also distinguish the scent of a baby bird from an adult one. Usually, young birds smell most likely of wet food, bread, and fruits while in the adult you can identify mostly the odor of their oily coat that protects his/her feathers from water. By observing our pets we will be aware of God's creative and sustaining presence in his/her creatures as well as in nature in general.

Practicing Mindful Meditation with Animals

We have pointed out the benefits of Mindful Meditation and companion animals respectively. In bringing together both of them, the benefits are greater, not only psychologically and physiologically, but also spiritually. The incorporation of animals into prayer or meditation can also increase the motivation for spending time in meditation. As observed in Chapter 2, child patients happily anticipate the animals' therapeutic visit. I am transferring these expectations to the prayer and meditation practices and considering that several believers will be willing to spend more time on meditation if they can do it side by side with animals.

There is a place for animals in Mindful Meditation. We can observe and appreciate them. We can watch the gracious movement of a worm or the elegant flight of a dove, the colorful butterflies, or the fur of a horse, without altering them with our emotions or knowledge. We must be aware of what we are doing and what we are seeing.

As we saw in Chapter 2, Winnicott considers animals as transitional objects. These transitional objects are the first distinguished possession from us. Pets are a great benefit in children's emotional development. Animals, as objects different from the children, allow letting go of the piece of cloth or the furry bear that has given security and perpetrate symbiotic relationships for a long time.¹⁷ In reference to Mindful Meditation, animals as objects different from us can help us to let go of pieces of cloth, such as concerns, stress, and distractions until we reach emptiness and being in optimal conditions to embrace God's presence, the maximum source of security.

Leading the Practice

Developing the Quiet Area

- Adequate space to hold the meeting, indoor or outdoors
- Chair, bench, or a piece of wood
- Pictures of animals and other gifts from nature, such as plants, sand, and stones
- Board to display the pictures and table or other surface to display natural elements
- Pets

¹⁷Jane K. Wilkes, *The Role of Companion Animals in Counseling and Psychology: Discovering Their Use in the Therapeutic Process* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2009), 9.

- Treats and fresh water for pets
- CD player and soft music
- Guide for the practice

Procedure

- Arrange an inviting space with chairs, bench, or piece of wood (if it is outdoor)
- Display the pictures on the board
- Create a welcome place for the pets with water and treats
- Play soft music
- Print the participant's guide
- Pray and bless the place and the practitioners

Participant Guide

- Find a comfortable place to sit
- Bring your pet nearby
- Consider the music just a background
- Start the meditation
- Focus on the present
- Concentrate on the smell of your pet, use tactile senses to stroke the fur, feather, or skin of your companion; admire the colors, the design in their fur, the feathers, and the eyes.

Appropriateness of the Use of the Prayer

Several reasons have allowed this prayer to bloom. Among them is the trend of using Eastern Meditation to counter stress. Practicing Mindfulness helps people to relax physically and emotionally, and experience peace and contentment. The Christian version of this Buddhist technique is very attractive for Westerners.

Mindfulness Meditation can be practiced at home by petting, admiring a flower, washing dishes, or eating. It also can be practiced at work, at the park, or wherever the practitioner can find a quiet place. It can be used in retreats and workshops. People of different ages can practice it.

Walking Meditation

Walking Meditation is an ancient practice common to many religions. Thich Nhat Hanh defines it as “meditation as while walking. We walk slowly, in a relaxed way, keeping a light smile on your lips.”¹⁸ It is a contemplative practice in which the practitioner pays attention to the body, balance, and movements when walking.

In the Christian context, it is a meditation while walking with heart and mind open to God’s revelation. The walk is slow, relaxed, and without any pressure of reaching a goal, such as covering determined mileage or speed, or trying to arrive to a destination. It is just walking in the spirit of relaxation, aware of the presence of God in each step.

Walking Meditation is an invitation to put aside all tension and recover from daily heaviness and/or body inactivity while enjoying the presence of the sacred, although the

¹⁸Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Long Road Turn to Joy: A Guide to Walking Meditation* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996), 3.

practice mostly is concentrated in body movements and not in thinking or being distracted by the surroundings. However, we can expand the original concept by allowing ourselves the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of the road, the contentment of companion animals that are walking with us or any other being, the fresh air, and the noise of stepping on the outdoor grass. Practiced indoors, walking meditation can be an invitation to calmly appreciate the beauty of the pets, the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the furniture, and even the noise of the female skeleton. It is a call to forget the busyness of the world, to reach our center and allow God to fill us with his own essence. The only effort the person must make is to render his/her mind to God next to his/her pet and sink in the deepness of his fulfilling presence.

Aubrey Fine discovers what he has called “walking therapy,” adding that “clinicians may find pleasant routes where they can walk with their clients and find privacy.”¹⁹ According a research study conducted by Kahn in 1997, children have special affinity with nature. Fine insists that benefits from walking therapy are bigger when combining the therapy with the assistance of companion animals.²⁰ This is a very appropriate moment to intimate with God and interact with animals and nature; the two more appropriate animals for walking therapy are dogs and birds. Dogs have the virtue of teaching walkers the value of patience. The dogs’ attention experiences several stimuli during the walk. Sometimes they stop to interact with other dogs, often they want to

¹⁹Aubrey H. Fine, “Animals and Therapists: Incorporating Animals in Outpatient Psychotherapy,” in *Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice*, ed. Aubrey Fine (San Diego: Academic Press, 2000), 199.

²⁰*Ibid.*

chase some squirrels or simply be petted by a person who is along the way. The owners must be patient with them.²¹ It is here where companion animals play a unique role in the life of the believer who is practicing meditation or praying while walking. He/she can appreciate the character of his/her legged companion and praise the Lord for the bringing of joy from his/her pet. The owner can get the benefit of slowing down his/her speed and lowering his/her blood pressure and heartbeat. In addition, the owner can learn that walking slowly allows him/her to appreciate nature.

Birds are another great source for walking prayer. The noise of the wings of flying birds, their singing, and the color of their feathers can encourage us to praise the Lord and to put aside our concerns to concentrate on creation, especially in this litter of gifted creatures. At the same time, birds inspire us to empty our inner soul to fill it with God's presence present in different beings.

The Bible invites us to see how creation reveals the sacred. In the book of Psalms we have a well-known psalm that reveals us the Glory of God: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handwork. Day to day pours forth speech. And night to night declares knowledge. There is not speech, nor are the words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world" (Ps. 19:1-4).

It is proper at this point to clarify that I am not talking about pantheism. I am talking from a fundamentalist frame. I am talking about God's revelation through diverse

²¹Ibid.

beings and in nature. I am stating that in addition to his/her revelation in his/her Word and through the Verb, Jesus Christ, God reveals him/herself in his/her creation and creatures.

Leading the Practice

Essentials

- Space adequate, indoors or outdoors, to meet the group
- If indoor, collection of natural elements, such a stones, flowers, leaves, and wood to display
- Comfortable place to sit
- Background music that includes nature sounds
- Participant's guide

Procedures

- Reserve the space.
- Collect items from nature (is it is indoor).
- Pray and bless the space and the participants.
- Introduce the practice by summarizing the practice's development and its results.
- Explain how to do the practice.
- Participant's guide.

- Walk and be aware of your movements, especially of your feet and the walk of your dog or the movements of the pet you are holding, whether it she or he is a cat, a chinchilla, a parrot, or a rabbit.
- Notice the feelings you are having; just the feelings not the emotions.
- Walk with a gesture that can help you to experience peace such as holding your pet looking at him/her tenderly.
- Still your mind or simply meditate on a passage from the Bible, a poem, or a remembrance brought by the pet you are walking or holding.
- Be aware of God's presence during your walk.

Appropriateness of the Use of the Prayer

The practice of Walking Meditation has experienced a growth in our days. One of the reasons is that it counters a common problem of modern life stress. People are very busy, and it is difficult to find a quiet moment. When a quiet moment is found in the midst of busyness, inertial commands make people fill those moments with listening to music, watching television, or surfing the Internet. It is more likely that a practice that forces one to be still without allowing any distraction is welcomed. A walk in the park with a dog and without an iPod or cell phone is a mental and physical renewal time.

Walking Meditation in the Christian context is a great way to be intimate with God. Adding animals as a new component to the experience earns richness since we are sharing time with the Creator and his/her creatures. Walking Meditation can be practiced by people of different ages, including children.

Churches and retreat centers are ideal to practice Walking Meditation in a group. However, any place can be the scenery for this practice. To practice it in individual places such as gardens, parks, and beaches, is preferred. It can be practiced at any time, but outdoors it would be better during the day; early morning and noon are good times. Practicing it in the evening can recharge your energy by the muscular exercise what implies making it difficult to sleep. Tiredness at this time can also be an impediment to its practice.

The Practice of the Presence of God

The Practice of the Presence of God is a contemplative practice created by Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence Herman of Resurrection was born as Nicholas Herman in France in 1611. At the age of 18 he had a spiritual awakening. Later he entered the Carmelites Order where he was named Lawrence Herman of Resurrection. Concerned with how often he spent his time of prayer rejecting stray thoughts and going back into them again, he started to look for a way of being in continual communion with God. He developed the habit of being in conversation with God all the time. Wherever he was, at work or in prayer, he tried to focus his heart and mind on God, thanking and praising God, and asking for his/her grace.²²

The Practice of the Presence of God, as explained by Brother Lawrence, “is to take pleasure in and become accustomed to [God] company, speaking humbly and

²²Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011). xiv-xxiv.

conversing lovely in our hearts with Him at all times and at every moment.”²³ It consists of a continual conversation with God in simplicity. To practice it, we only need to recognize that God is always present, not just present because of his/her omnipresence, but intimately present to us. Then, we must address ourselves to him every moment. Brother Lawrence used the image of God in a throne, as formula to keep his connection with God.

When practicing God’s presence, we can use a symbol or image for God as a reminder that he is always there. Here animals can play an important role; they can be our reminder of God who has created them. We can have present an animal or we can have them in our mind as symbols of God. Pets are a great source of reminding. We can Practice of the Presence of God while doing other things, such as petting, driving, washing dishes, cooking, gardening, at work, in class, and during any other activity. The key point of this practice is to be conscious that God is present and to engage with him in a conversation that could be verbal or just mental. In our conversation with God, we can praise, adore, and love him/her continually as gratitude for the grace he/she offers to us permanently. We also can ask God for assistance and direction.

In the New Testament, Matthew, narrating the birth of Jesus the Messiah, cites a prophecy saying, “The virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which translated means, ‘God is with us’ (Matt. 1:23). The expression, “God with us,” denotes that it is more than a presence for all and in all; it is a

²³Ibid., 95.

divine presence in individual relationships. In the New Testament, we also find the apostle Paul commanding the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). What Brother Lawrence teaches is exactly what the apostle commands, to pray all the time; be aware of God’s presence always, be in His presence continually.

The Practice of the Presence of God brings several benefits:

- It allows the practitioner to become familiar with the ways God reveals himself to us.
- Our faith “is more alive and more active in every aspect of our lives, particular in our areas of need.”²⁴
- It “strengthens our hope.”²⁵ The hope grows at the same time that our spiritual knowledge of God grows.
- We feel secure that God can hold and support us.
- When we practice the emptiness, God is ready to fill us with his/her healing presence.
- We experience the peace in getting ready to exercise justice for other beings including animals and forest.
- It makes us to become detach of the mundane things and be aware of God’s presence.
- The soul become familiar with God, “that it spends almost all its life in continual acts of love, adoration contrition, confidence, thanksgiving, offering, beseeching, and all other excellent virtues.”²⁶

²⁴Ibid., 109.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 110.

The presence of God requires trusting in God; to trust that he/she is there at all times. To trust that there is no such thing as divine abandonment. The presence of animals in the practice of this prayer helps us in the process of trusting. Aubrey Fine states that “the client has to have faith in the ability of the therapist to ‘hold them’ psychologically during times when they are overwhelmed with intense feelings.”²⁷ The animal presence brings up the level of trustworthiness in the therapist allowing the client to talk about things very painful. Using a metaphor, we can compare the therapist with God. Sometimes we are not able to let go of the pain, the intolerance, the problems, the sadness, the acceleration of a busy life; however, with an animal we can overcome the feeling of fear and entering into a trustworthy relationship with God.

How to Facilitate the Practice of the Presence of God

The Practice of the Presence of God is a pure and simple way to be connected with God that most practitioner can lead the practice. I will take the following steps:

Essentials

- A small, quiet space (indoor or outdoor).
- Chairs.
- Table to put Christian symbols.
- Christian symbols such as a cross, a jar with oil, a picture of a lamb, or any other element.

²⁷Wilkes, *The Role of Companion Animals*, 79.

- Pets
- Treats, water, and cushions for animals.
- Cushions
- Participant's guide.

Procedure

- Choose and reserve the space.
- Arrange the space.
- Put the cushions next to each chair.
- Bring water and treats.
- Write a guide for the participants.
- Summarize the practice to introduce it to the group.

Participant's Guide

- Assume a comfortable position and relax with breathing exercises
- Look at your pet as a symbol that represents God's creation and reminds us God (pets can identify God as creator, as giver of precious creatures and as a companion for us, even as a healer who cares for human and nonhuman wellness).
- Engage in conversation with God.
- Just be for awhile in God's presence, watching and/or touching your pet.
- End the practice by gently coming back to the group.
- Share your experiences.

Appropriateness of the Use of the Prayer

As Driskill points out, “Spiritual and emotional development are so intertwined,” reasoning why “it is useful to understand how our emotional temperaments and preferences may influence our spiritual practices.”²⁸ Although this prayer doesn’t have a complicate method, it demands active participation. Testing the practice allows it to fit well with individuals of different temperaments. However, because of its simplicity and adaptation to any situation of the practitioner, most people can engage in Practicing God’s Presence.

Practicing God’s Presence can result in an excellent technique to motivate children to pray in the company of their pets. In addition, it will provide them with a sense of security. Knowing that God is with them all the time will give comfort, especially for little ones who are dealing with issues of anxiety due to separation of their parents when entering to the school or with any new experience.

This practice can also defeat feelings of loneliness in aging people who are in rest homes, hospitals, or any other place away from their family.

Finally, in order to accomplish the goal of prayer without ceasing, every believer should take advantage of the Practice of the God’s Presence.

Ignatian Imagination Prayer

Ignatius Loyola was a Spanish nobleman born in 1491. He became a soldier and in 1521 one of his legs was wounded. He spent his convalescence reading Christian

²⁸Joseph D. Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History and Practice* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1999), 40.

literature. During that time he was passionate for the life of the saints, among them Francis of Assisi and Dominic, and their service to the Lord. He was engaged in pilgrimage and later he made a life wows of poverty. He founded the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits).²⁹

Ignatian spirituality brings together the gospels and daily life experiences. He wrote a manual of spiritual exercises. The exercises include methods of examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, vocal and mental prayer, and imagination.³⁰

Ignatian Prayer is a contemplative image-filled prayer, where the practitioner uses his/her imagination while meditating on a biblical passage. The passage becomes alive in the mind of the practitioners as if they were watching a play. This effect is possible when we follow the four steps that Saint Ignatius indicates:

1. Visual: We imagine the background and the beings mentioned in the passage.
2. Audible: We imagine the interaction and communication among people and among animals if there are.
3. Smelling: In our imagination we smell and taste as much as we can from what we have visualized in the passage. It can be the taste of a fruit, the smell of people and/or animals, perhaps bread, and even of the grass where the people sat.
4. Involvement: We imagine ourselves meeting the characters, humans and non-human beings and laying hands on other elements of the scene, trying to get a spiritual insight

²⁹Liz Carmichael, "Catholic Saints and Reformers (16th to 19th centuries)," in *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, from East to West*, ed. Gordon Mursell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 204.

³⁰Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Anthony Mottola (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1989), 38-43.

from it. Dr. Dreitcer explains that Ignatius believed these four steps would lead the person to “a state of contemplation in which the prayer’s consciousness catches her up beyond self-reflective awareness into an encompassing experience of union with Christ.”³¹ The ultimate goal of this practice is to deepen intimacy with God in a way that flows into loving service in the world.

Facilitation of the Practice

Essentials

- Quiet space (indoor or outdoor)
- Chairs
- Bibles
- Guided response

Procedure

- Chose and reserve the space
- Arrange the chairs in a circle
- Place Bibles in the chair
- Write a summary of the practice
- Plan a guided response

³¹Dreitcer, “Mindful Meditation” (Lecture).

Implementation

- Invite the participants to sit comfortably and relax by gently moving of their shoulders and neck, and by deep breathing.
- Talk about Saint Ignatius and his spiritual exercises.
- Define the practice.
- Suggest the practitioner to choose a passage from the Scriptures, especially one where there are animals (the leader can mention some passages for the practitioner to choose from).
- Invite the participants to put their imagination at work in the passage they chose imagining the scene mentioned in the passage.
- Start with the guided response. Encourage them to imagine the background of the scene. Invite them to imagine the movements of the animals, the conversation of the characters, and their actions. Invite them to integrate their smell and tactile senses to the scene by imagining the odors of the sheep, the cow, the doves, or the any other animal, elements from nature, such a flowers or fruits. Suggest they stimulate their imagination by feeling the texture of the fur or feathers of the animals and elements they see. Encourage them to get involved in the scene.
- Invite participants to gently come back to the group.
- Allow time for them to share their experiences.

Mallon discovered that animals have symbols of power and nurturance. Images of flying with eagles or horses with wings are proof of Mallon discovering. People feel

strengthened in front of animals.³² People build their own reality according to past experiences; having now an ally to walk in their journey of faith that is intangible; with which they can talk and touch is an encouraging partner in reaching a goal. It is not different when praying or meditating. Prayer and meditation could be a challenge in the life of the believer. Having next to them a companion, someone who they trust as a compelling force to explore the beauty and power of the mysterious world of prayer and meditation could improve the quality time spend in these practices.

If we adapt this practice to Ignatian Prayer with the inclusion of animals we can assume that it will work in a similar way. The narrative animated by inclusion of animals should provide insights to the practitioners, allowing them to find themselves in the midst of practicing the Ignatian Prayer.

³²Fine, "Animals and Therapists," 195.

CHAPTER 6

DATA AND PROGRAM REVIEW

How open are Christians to incorporating animals into contemplative practices? Does the incorporation of animals into spiritual disciplines motivate practitioners to expend more time in prayer or meditation? The answer to these questions was sought through a spiritual formation survey. The survey was intended to be distributed at The California-Pacific Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church where clergy and lay people meet yearly. However, permission to pass the questionnaire was rejected. As a consequence, the questionnaire was distributed, with previous authorization, in three local churches comprising different ethnicities. The churches were Rosewood United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, whose members are mostly Filipino, Iglesia Metodista Unida Rosewood in Los Angeles which is Hispanic, and Trinity United Methodist Church of Ontario, whose congregation is multicultural, consisting of African Americans, Caucasians, Cubans, Ecuadorians, Hondurans, Iranians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Russians, and Uruguayans.

The questionnaire was distributed to the worship service attendees. They were advised that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and that their responses would be anonymous. A copy of the questionnaire is Appendix A.

Survey questions were divided into four areas: demographic data, time expended in solitude with God, reaction to including animals in contemplative spiritual practices, knowing if there are believers practicing meditation or prayer including animals.

Survey Results

Demographic data was divided into four categories: age, gender, ethnicity, lay or a clergy person. Each category consisted of information that would be relevant for evaluating the diversity of the participants. A summary of demographic data is found in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic data

Category	Number of respondents
Age range	13-89
Average	51
Gender	
Male	9
Female	41
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	12
Hispanic	23
Filipino	8
Other	7
Lay	48
Clergy	2

Survey results indicated that the average age of the respondents was 51 years old. Participation of males was 19% while females were 81%. This could indicate that women are more interested in spiritual growth or that women are more willing to share their thoughts about spirituality.

In the category of ethnicity, there were 24% Caucasian, 46% Hispanic, 16% Filipino, and 14% other ethnicities. Hispanics had a higher percentage of participation

than other ethnic groups. One reason may be that it was one of the larger congregations that participated in the survey; another could be that they want to support me as a pastor of this church for 9 years. Interestingly, the largest congregation, Filipino, did not have very much participation. Their lack of participation could have been a matter of administration of the survey or a lack of interest.

Only the 4% of the participants were clergy, while the percentage of laity was 96%. The results apparently respond to the number of clergy surveyed. Two clergy participated. However, one of the clergy had pastored two of the three churches and she did not repeat the survey.

Time spent in solitude with God is important for establishing the interest of the participants in using contemplative spiritual practices in their spiritual growth. Table 2 contains a summary of the answers to the question regarding time spent in solitude.

The average time spent in prayer and/or meditation was 9.6 hours per week. Half (50%) of all respondents pray one hour or less per week, 12% pray between one and two hours, 14% pray between two and three hours, 4% pray between 3 and 4 hours, and 20% pray more than four hours.

Table 2. Hours per week spent praying and/or meditating in solitude

Time	Number of answers
1 hour or less	25
1-2 hours	6
2-3 hours	7
3-4 hours	2
More than 4 hours	10

The results in Table 2 indicate that all the participants expend time in solitude with God through prayer or meditation although the time spent in solitude varied from less than an hour to more than four hours per week. These results could be interpreted as an indication that prayer and/or meditation constitute an important component in their spiritual formation efforts.

The reaction to the integration of animals into contemplative practices seems favorable. Results show that 28% of the respondents were strongly in favor of including animals and 24% were favorable. Of the respondents, 6.8% were neither favorable nor unfavorable; 10% were unfavorable and 24% were strongly unfavorable. More than a half of the respondents (52%) were in favor while less than a quarter of the respondents (22%) were against the inclusion of animals (see Table 3).

Table 3. Reaction to including animals in prayer or meditation in solitude

	Strongly favorable	Favorable	Neither favorable nor unfavorable	Unfavorable	Strongly unfavorable
Gender					
Female	12	9	5	3	12
Male	2	2	2	2	0
Ethnicity					
Caucasian	9	1	1	1	0
Hispanic	3	10	2	2	5
Filipino	1	1	4	4	1
Not ident.	1				6
Total ans.	14	12	7	5	12
Ave. age	57	49	50	50	59

According to the Table 4, 76% of the respondents do not include animals in their spiritual practices; 62% were females and 10% males. Regarding ethnicity 12% were Caucasian, 38% Hispanic, and 18% Filipino; two persons did not reveal their ethnicity.

Table 4. Do you currently have a spiritual practice that includes animals?

	No	Yes	If yes, describe
Gender			
Female	31	9	2
Male	5	2	
Total			
Ethnicity			
Caucasian	6	6	1
Hispanic	19	4	1
Filipino	9	1	1
Not ident.	2		
Total ans.	37	11	2
Ave. age	58	52	64

The percentage of people including animals in their spiritual practices was 22%; from them, 18% were females and 4% were males. Regarding ethnicity, 12% were Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, and 2% Filipino.

Among the respondents two of them (4%), two females, one Caucasian and one Hispanic, described their spiritual practices on the questionnaire:

Sitting with my dogs outside or indoors and meditating while I am giving them a massage or scratching then in a peaceful setting.

Since many years ago I pray in company of my cats; and when practicing walking meditation or God's presence I praise the Lord for each animal I see.

The number of people who are in favor of integrating animals into contemplative spiritual practices and the number of those who already have integrated them is significant. I

interpret these numbers as indicators that more people are open to include animals in their time for prayer and meditation than those who are not in favor.

Spiritual Formation Program for Lay People

Part of my study was to plan and teach a six-week course on spiritual formation. In this course we explored Christian contemplative practices that incorporate animals into them. I introduced four contemplative practices, Mindfulness, Practice of the Presence of God, Walking Prayer, and Ignatian Imagination, from their historical practical perspective. We devoted time to learning new rituals that include animals, discovering the role of feeling and emotion, and the role of the divine presence.

We met once a week during six weeks with the goal of developing new habits to cultivate our spirit and nurture our soul and body by practicing contemplative disciplines with companion animals. The course requirements were attendance, class participation, practices of spiritual disciplines, and journaling experiences.

Two books were required: the *Bible* and *The Faith We Sing*. I also recommended other books that students could borrow from me: Antony Mottola's translation of *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*; Diana L. Hayes, *Hagar's Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World*; Joseph P. Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History, and Practice*; Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to*

the Practice of Meditation and *The Long Road Turns to Joy: A Guide to Walking Meditation*.¹

The classes were held on Thursdays from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m., from August 4 to September 8, 2011, at Trinity United Methodist Church in Ontario. Being the senior pastor there, it was not difficult to make the arrangement for the course as well for each class.

The course was advertised four weeks in advance, through flyers inserted in the bulletin. It also was among the announcements each Sunday. Although we opened registration four weeks in advance, nobody signed up before the first class. I had planned the classes to each last an hour and a half. After the first class, I noticed the length was kind of long for the participants and as a group we decided to keep the class at one hour.

The range age of the class was from 60 to 86 years old; the dynamic of the group was pleasing. I observed a good level of energy and spirit of joy among the participants, a fact reflected on the videos.

It is interesting that only one dog was in the classroom. People came from different places, some of them used to come directly after exercising for medical reasons, which made it difficult to bring their pets to class.

¹Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. Anthony Motola (New York: Image Books, 1964); Diana L. Hayes, *Hagar's Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World* (Notre Dame, IN: Saint Mary's College, 1995); Joseph P. Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History, and Practice* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1999); Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (Boston: Bacon Press, 1987); Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Long Road Turns to Joy: A Guide to Walking Meditation* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996).

In the first class, Growing in the Image of God, I began with a short devotional, followed by an ice breaker, which was then followed by the course introduction. I had decorated the room with a coffee table where I put little animals and a small pot with a plant. The chairs were in a circle. Since I was expecting more people I had set up 12 chairs, but only 8 people, all women, showed up for the course. One of them dropped the course after the third class to go on vacation.

Mindfulness Contemplative Practice was the subject of the second class. It was difficult because only Frederick, an adorable dog, was present. All the participants concentrated their attention on Frederick. However, they had the opportunity to practice Mindfulness at home during the week.

In class number three we learned “The Practice of the Presence of God.” I did not follow my initial lesson plan regarding videos of Baroque Art and scientific revolution since the participants had higher education and knew very well the époque of Baroque as well as the scientific revolution. Then, I went directly into the history of the practice and talked about Brother Lawrence.

Walking prayer was one of the most interesting classes. I taught the discipline and we practiced it. The only one who was able to walk was me. Then, I gave an example, but at the same time I tried to make the participants feel good even though they had difficulty for walking because of their age or illness, such as arthritis. Instead of walking, they sat and meditated in the Lord. Through the sharing time I noticed that not being able to walk was not significant for the group because they expressed different ways that they felt the presence of God.

The last practice we learned was Ignatian Prayer. During the previous week of the class I regretted selecting this practice for the course. I thought this practice was not significantly related to animals. If we are using the imagination we must concentrate on images not in animals. How can we include animals in this kind of prayer? All my concerns vanished by the end of the class. I heard amazing stories about this practice during the sharing time. As I mentioned previously, Joyce had a wonderful experience. She selected the passage from the Bible where the psalmist recognizes that God knew him from the womb of his mother (Ps. 139). There are no animals present in this Psalm and there were no animals present in the classroom. However, she received a message from God. She thought how much she loved her three dogs, Noel, Holly, and Mardi; suddenly, she had a revelation: God, who formed her in the womb of her dearest mother, had given her this love for animals. It was a special experience where the Lord reaffirmed her passion for animals and encouraged her to spend time in meditation with her four-legged companions that include not only the dogs but three horses, Sunny, T. C., and Desi, and a cat, Sadie. God delivered a personal message for Joyce with some absent dogs.

Carolyn picked up the passage where Jesus blessed the children. Her imagination pictured the children playing with dogs while they were with Jesus. For her it was a message of reaffirmation of her call to work with children in the church. She is the one who picks up children and brings them to Sunday School, and, at the same time, educates them to love nature and care for animals.

Maxine selected the passage of Noah's Ark and visualized Pocket and Chico, her dogs, among the animals. She was amazed mentally looking at the pairs of animals in the ark and of God's love and caring for animals.

Argie had chosen Psalm 8 and in her imagination saw herself and her dog Taffi looking at the moon on a warm night. The moon was there to remain her how wonderful God's creation is and to recognize that nature and animals celebrate God's work. She joined Taffi and the moon in glorifying God.

The last session was a celebration. We celebrated what we had learned, we celebrated God's presence and love, we celebrated the opportunity to include animals in our spiritual journey, and we celebrated the unique experiences with God and each participant.

The following is the journal of one of the participants, Pam Wilson,² who kept writing her experiences after the course:

October 2, 2011

Walking along the shore in Leucadia, CA and letting the waves lick my feet while I decide which round, smooth, colorful stones to put in my sack, I have the privilege of watching the shore birds in their daily routine.

There is a rhythm to their day. I observe the nearly perfect flight pattern of pelicans flying to their feeding spot in the ocean, just beyond the waves, and the gulls suddenly realizing that they really should follow them. The pelicans seem to know where the fish are. Meanwhile, the sandpipers with their skinny little legs are strutting on the sand, waiting for morsels of goodies to wash upon the beach with each wave. I observed one in particular—which I named "Piper"—who could not walk very well because of an injured leg, but he certainly could fly like the rest of his brothers and sisters. He was not bound to the earth because of his injury because he was able to spread his wings and fly into the air and be free and happy.

²Pam Wilson's name has been used with her permission.

There were clusters of Sandpipers, taking a nap, all standing on one leg, oblivious to the humans around them.

There were clusters of Gulls sitting quietly in huge groups as though having a meeting, or a break.

Other Seagulls were hanging around the humans with children who came with their lunch and bags of snacks. There were pigeons hanging around with the gulls. There seemed to be one “top gull” with each group who would shoo away any gulls who wandered into his space.

I watch the silent alarms that suddenly aroused all the gulls to move further down the beach to something interesting and they all took flight at once and swooped away. It was amazing.

One of the most amazing sights of all was watching a lifeguard push a man who was paralyzed below the waist across the beach in a rubber wheelchair and into the ocean where he unhooked him from the chair into the water. We watched him swim out and out beyond the breakers while the lifeguard rolled the rubber wheelchair back to the lifeguard shack. The man was in the water for a long time, bobbing up and down. I tried to understand what being free and in the cool water must have meant to him. Unable to walk on land but able to swim in the water must have been exhilarating.

It reminded me of the little sandpiper—unable to walk on the sand, but able to fly into the air and be free. How similar they were.

Once again, God sends us many lessons every day. All we have to do is open our eyes and see the wonder.

October 26, 2011

Plants and all manner of trees and flowers have always been my great love in my life. I find solitude in the quiet reverence of my garden, planting, weeding, feeding, and talking to the different plants that are suddenly changing before my eyes. The beauty that God has given us is something to behold.

It was a sunny day with a soothing breeze turning my windmill ever so softly and I was talking to God and thanking Him for the many blessings in my life and asking him for guidance in other places of my life that needed to be “fixed.” We are always asking God for a “sign” that he has heard our prayers, like little children. And there it was – a tiny beautiful green praying mantis – sitting quietly on an equally green leaf, looking at me with a questioning look, as if he was saying, “Don’t you trust in the Lord? I certainly do.” God speaks to us in many ways. All we need to do is listen.

It was a source of joy for me knowing that Pam was applying what she has learned in the course. Testimonies reflect that the time spent in prayer and/or meditation have increased in six of the seven participants.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This project has set forth a framework for a more integrated and comprehensive spiritual development that includes animals. Direction and insight for this undertaking has been gathered from Scripture, a survey, classes, observations, and a six-week course on spiritual development through contemplative spiritual practices, in which were found interests in including animals into spiritual practices. Research has shown that integration of animals into contemplative practices is both biblically and practically possible.

In the Hebrew Bible we find the narration of the first creation, which starts with a statement, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” (Gen. 1:1). The world occurs from chaos. God establishes a place for each thing he/her creates and names it. The Hebrew verb for creation is *bara*; the subject of this verb in the Hebrew Bible always is God. That means each thing of creation emerges as a masterpiece of God’s creation including nonhuman and human beings. As the outcome of the same creation, we are bound to God and other beings, such as animals whose can help us to connect with God.¹

Hyland finds that humans and nonhumans were created as nonviolent creatures, with a natural tendency toward kindness. Rolston III points out that God is for humans and nonhumans.²

¹Rashi, *Bereishis*, vol. 3 of *The Metsudah Chumash/Rashi: A New Linear Translation*, by Avrohom Davis, 2nd rev. ed. (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1993), 14.

²J. R. Hyland, *God’s Covenant with Animals: A Biblical Basis for the Humane Treatment of All Creatures* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000); Holmes Rolston III, “Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?” *Zygon* 29, no. 2 (June 1994): 205-229.

Saint Francis loved God and his creatures; he loved creation and he loved animals. He expressed his love through compassion; compassion for the poor, the lepers, the environment, the birds, the wolves, the fishes, and all kind of animals. He took care of them. He contemplated God through them. He prayed with the poor and the sick, as well as in the midst of nature in the presence of animals. We can conclude that he was inspired by these creatures and other elements from nature to pray and meditate. At the present we can recreate his experience and spiritually grow through animal spirituality.

Soelle remarks that God can be experienced through nature; and nature must be protected from human destruction.³ The peace acquired in the mystical experience leads us to live in peaceable relationships with others, including animals. If there is to be a peaceable relationship with animals, it is crucial to include them into contemplative practices.

The ethicist and philosopher Stephen Webb, in his review of the book of Genesis, states that God gave authority to men over animals but “power and authority is most clearly illustrated in the self-sacrificial life of Jesus Christ.”⁴ The authority that humankind has over animals is an authority entrusted by God to lovingly take care of animals who were created by God on the same day as man. The power entrusted by God to men and women is not a power for destroying but a creative power oriented to serve

³Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry, Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

⁴Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 63.

and care for nature. We can cultivate animal life awareness by including animals in spiritual practices.

Psychophysiology shows that historically, there have been interests in the effects of psychological conditions on physiological functions. At the present, it is focused on the effects that neural and physiological factors have on psychological processes. Summarizing, psychophysiology “is intimately related to anatomy and physiology but is also concerned with psychological phenomena—the experience and behavior of organisms in the physical and social environment.”⁵

The practice of spiritual discipline originates with physical and psychological responses. Ancient wisdom used spiritual disciplines to cultivate positive emotions. Mental and spiritual practices create internal changes. Researchers have shown positive changes in the body in general, the brain, and the psyche when practicing prayer and meditation.⁶

Pets do wonders for people's physical and mental well-being. Pets provide their owners with unconditional love and loyalty. In return, the experience of caring for the animal imparts a sense of belonging and opportunities for play and enjoyment. Speechless communication with a pet, or simply watching a cat or a fish, may produce a relaxation response in our body.

⁵John Cacioppo, Louis G. Tassinary, and Gary G. Berntson, *Handbook of Psychophysiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.

⁶Alane Daugherty, *The Power Within: From Neuroscience to Transformation* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 2007), 145.

Wilkes' study, mentioned in the second chapter, showed that the presence of a companion animal in therapy sessions brings benefits as follows:

1. Improves the trust of the client toward the psychologist; the animal presence works as an icebreaker during the first sessions allowing for rapport building.
2. Works as a catalyst for improving the healing process; the companion animal reduces the amount of sadness and brings hope for most of the clients.
3. Improves the therapeutic environment; the company of an animal brings a "sense of warmth and safety."⁷
4. Stimulates the feeling of unconditional acceptance; this fact enhances the capacity for growing.
5. Provides nurturing; "the animals not only supply nurture, they also teach about nurturing, and provide reciprocity in that they allow the client to nurture."⁸
6. Provides a sense of well-being with the psychologist; the animals "feed them emotionally and spiritually" especially those working with their own pets."⁹
7. Creates a sense of sacredness in the psychologist office; the empathy and sensitivity of the animal companion gives this sense, in the words of one of the interviewees the animals "bring the soul to feeling."¹⁰

⁷Jane K. Wilkes, *The Role of Companion Animals in Counseling and Psychology: Discovering Their Use in Therapeutic Process* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 2009), 38-75.

⁸Ibid., 74.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

From a psychological perspective, studies have revealed how important the incorporation of animals in therapy could be. Linda Nebbe's table, *Therapeutic Approaches of Nature Therapy*, lists the role of animals in different animal-assisted therapeutic approaches as follows: (a) Instrumental therapy—the animals become an extension of the person, (b) Relationship therapy—the person establishes a kind relationship with the animal where the person feels needed and loved; (c) Passive therapy—the person is relaxed by observing the animal; (d) Cognitive therapy—the person uses the information about animals to understand and to relate with respect to others; (e) Spiritual therapy—relationship with animals favor a sense of oneness with creation bringing peace and well-being.¹¹

Looking at the effects produced by animals in therapeutic situations led me to believe that incorporating animals into contemplative practices can benefit personal spiritual growth, as well as have several positive effects on body and emotions.

Through meditation and prayer we can bring balance to our body and mind. Dr. Daugherty explains how two major physiological systems work together in our bodies to keep the homeostasis. She stated that “there is absolutely no other activity that I believe leads to higher potential, higher internal development, and higher states of consciousness than meditation.”¹²

¹¹Linda Nebbe, “Nature Therapy,” in *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice*, ed. Aubrey Fine (San Diego: Academy Press, 2000), 403. Nebbe explains that she has adapted and extended a table originally developed by James Serpall in *People, Animals, and the Environment* [bulletin of the Delta Society, spring 1983].

¹²Daugherty, *The Power Within*, 203.

Meditation and contemplative prayers are spiritual practices that may help us to get focused. This is equivalent to forgetting everything—workload, concerns, deadlines, sad memories, and conflicts—just to mention a few. The attention required by contemplative prayer brings us to our center and to a break from stressfulness. Contemplation of the beauty inside or outside our bodies brings calm, awareness, and happiness, and promotes higher emotions.

This research has led me to conclude that including animals in contemplative practices brings spiritual, psychological, and physiological welfare and inspires people to spend more time in solitude with God.

With this perspective, the potential for including animals into contemplative practices for spiritual development is virtually unlimited.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY

Survey Regarding Including Animals in Contemplative Spiritual Practices

Introduction

My name is Myrian Monnet-Cisneros and I am conducting research as a student at the Claremont School of Theology in the Doctor in Ministry Program. My telephone number is 626-795-1433. My e-mail address is: monnetcisneros@aol.com.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to study how people can bring together humans and animals into contemplative spiritual practices.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

The survey is anonymous and will be destroyed at the conclusion of my research.

Sharing the Results

I plan to write my thesis based on the survey, library research, guided discussions, and on the results of a six week program of contemplative spiritual practices. I will submit my thesis to the Claremont School of Theology as a requirement for graduation.

If you decide to participate by completing the survey, please deposit this response sheet in the appropriate box located at the narthex of the chapel. Thank you for your time and your willingness in helping with this study.

Survey Questions

Demographic data:

- Age _____
- Gender _____
- Ethnicity _____
- Lay or a clergy person _____

Please circle the response that best describes your experience:

1. How many hours per week do you pray and/or meditate in solitude?
 - a. One hour or less
 - b. Between one and two hours
 - c. Between two and three hours
 - d. Between three and four hours
 - e. More than four hours

2. How favorable is your reaction to including animals in contemplative spiritual practices such as being accompanied by a dog for a walking meditation, having a cat in your lap while praying, or watching animals in their natural habitat in outdoor prayer/meditation?
 - a. Strongly favorable
 - b. Favorable
 - c. Neither favorable nor unfavorable
 - d. Unfavorable
 - e. Strongly unfavorable

3. Do you currently have a spiritual practice that includes animals?

- a. No
- b. Yes

If yes, please describe

APPENDIX B
SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROGRAM

**Spiritual Formation Program for Lay People
Spring 2011**

In this course, we will explore Christian contemplative practices that incorporate animals into them, as a means of spiritual formation both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, we will introduce some contemplative practices from their historical perspective and be acquainted with different on how to embody Christian spirituality. Practically, we will explore particular methods of spiritual development including prayer and meditation. Attention to new rituals that include animals, the role of feeling and emotion, and the role of the divine, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit will be of interest to both clergy and lay people who want to make their pets their allies in their spiritual life.

Meeting Day, Time and Dates:

Thursday from 7 p.m. to 8:30 pm, from August 4 through September 8

Contact:

Rev. Myrian Monnet

Ontario Trinity United Methodist Church, Pastor

Phone: (909) 986 0266; (909) 391 1433

Email: pastormyriantrinityumc@gmail.com

Pam Wilson

Ontario Trinity UMC, Secretary

Phone: (909) 986 0266; (909) 815 6638

Email: pam.tumc@gmail.com

Books:

Required

Bible

The Faith We Sing

Recommended

Antony Mottola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*. New York: Image Books, 1964.

Diana L. Hayes. *Hagar's Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World (Madaleve Lecture in Spirituality: 1995)*. Notre Dame, IN: Saint Mary's College, 1995.

Joseph Driskill. *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History, and Practice*. Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1999.

Thich Naht Hanh. *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*. Boston: Bacon Press, 1987.

Thich Naht Hanh. *The Long Road Turns to Joy: A Guide to Walking Meditation*. Berkeley, Parallax Press. 1996

Objective:

We will attempt to develop new habits to cultivate our spirit and nurture our soul and body by practicing contemplative disciplines.

Requirements:

1. Attendance and class participation
2. Practice of spiritual disciplines
3. Journaling

Additional information on assignments can be distributed in class.

Course Schedule of Topics and Readings:

August 4: Introduction to course; animal therapy; incorporating animals into contemplative practices, and survey.

August 11: Mindfulness

August 18: Practice of the Presence of God

August 25: Walking Prayer

September 1: Ignatian Imagination

September 8: Sharing experiences; survey and course evaluation.

Lesson Plan**Week #1**

Class thought: Growing in the image of God

Objectives:

1. To introduce the course
2. To enhance the desire to grow spiritually
3. To introduce the incorporation of animals into our spiritual disciplines.

Resources:

1. Hymnal
2. Bible

Procedures and Sequence of the Experience:

1. Start with devotion time (5 minutes).
2. Ice breaker: 'Whom is the owner of . . .' (5 minutes).
3. Self- introductions (10 minutes).
4. Course introduction (20 minutes).
5. Questions and answers (7 minutes).
6. Adjourn (3 minutes).

Lesson Plan

Week #2

Lesson Title: Mindfulness Contemplative Practice

Objectives:

1. To learn how to practice Mindfulness
2. To notice God's presence
3. To learn how to notice the presence of God with an animal

Resources:

1. Hymnal
2. Bible
3. Video
4. Pets
5. Plastic bags, towel paper, treats for pets.

Procedures and Sequence of the Experience:

1. Start with devotion time (5 minutes)
2. As an introduction present the video and allow the participants to talk about Asian philosophies of life (10 minutes).
3. Describe the life of Han//////// (3 minutes).
4. Explain the practice (10 minutes).
5. Check for understanding: questions and answers (5 minutes).
6. Practice the spiritual discipline (15 minutes)

7. Share the experiences and evaluate the practice (10 minutes)
8. Adjourn (3 minutes)

Lesson Plan

Week #3

Lesson Title: The Practice of the Presence of God

Objectives:

1. To learn how to practice the Presence of God
2. To notice God's presence
3. To learn how to practice it when feeding, bathing, or petting an animal

Materials:

1. Videos of Baroque Art and Scientific Revolution
2. Dog and cat dry food and shampoo, bird food, horse food
3. Soap and dishes
4. Pets
5. Plastic bags, towel paper, treats for pets.

Procedures and Sequence of the Experience:

1. Start with devotion time (5 minutes)
2. As an introduction present the videos of Baroque Art and Scientific Revolution and allow the participants to talk about baroque buildings and art pieces that they have seen (10 minutes).
3. Describe the life of Brother Lawrence (3 minutes).
4. Explain the practice (10 minutes).
5. Check for understanding: questions and answers (5 minutes).
6. Practice the spiritual discipline (15 minutes)
7. Share the experiences and evaluate the practice (10 minutes)
8. Adjourn (3 minutes)

Lesson Plan

Week #4

Lesson Title: Walking Prayer

Objectives:

1. To learn how to practice walking prayer
2. To notice God's presence
3. To learn how to practice it when walking our pets.

Materials:

1. Pictures of labyrinth
2. Book *The Long Road Turns To Joy*, Thich Nhat Hanh
3. Articles from Newspaper about walking benefits
4. Pets
5. Plastic bags, towel paper, treats for pets.

Procedures and Sequence of the Experience:

1. Start with devotion time (5 minutes)
2. As an introduction discuss the articles from the Newspaper in pairs (10 minutes).
3. History of the practice (3 minutes).
4. Explain the practice (10 minutes).
5. Check for understanding: questions and answers (5 minutes).
6. Practice the spiritual discipline (15 minutes)
7. Share the experiences and evaluate the practice (10 minutes)
8. Adjourn (3 minutes)

Lesson Plan

Week #5

Lesson Title: Ignatian Prayer

Objectives:

1. To learn how to practice Ignatian Prayer
2. To notice God's presence

3. To learn how to practice it when been with our pets.

Materials:

1. Video camera and/or cell phone
2. Book *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, translated by Anthony Mottola.
3. Pets
4. Plastic bags, towel paper, treats for pets

Procedures and Sequence of the Experience:

1. Start with devotion time (5 minutes)
2. As an introduction use the camera or cell phone to illustrate how our mind should work in this practice (5 minutes).
3. History of the practice and biography of Saint Ignatio (8 minutes).
4. Explain the practice (10 minutes).
5. Check for understanding: questions and answers (5 minutes).
6. Practice the spiritual discipline (15 minutes)
7. Share the experiences and evaluate the practice (10 minutes)
8. Adjourn (3 minutes)

Lesson Plan

Week #6

Lesson Title: Our journey

Objectives:

1. To summarize the four practices learned
2. To stress the importance of seeking for God's presence in prayer and/or meditation
3. To stress how the practice could be enhanced with pets' participation.

Materials:

1. Bibles
2. Hymnals
3. Pets' pictures

Procedures and Sequence of the Experience:

1. Start with dinner (30 minutes).
2. Devotion time (5 minutes)

3. As an introduction ask each person to show their pets' pictures and describe them just using three adjectives (10 minutes).
4. Survey
5. Share the experiences from the practices (30 minutes)
6. Adjourn (3 minutes)
7. Course evaluation

APPENDIX C
COURSE EVALUATION FORM

Course Evaluation Form

Please, circle the response that best describe your experience.

The church facility demonstrate love and caring for animals and earth.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree or disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly agree

The course leaders and the others participants made me fell welcomed.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree or disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly agree

I have learned new ways for spiritual development through contemplative practices and new rituals that include animals.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree or disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly agree

I discovered new gifts and abilities in myself that will be helpful in improving the life of animals and earth.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree or disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly agree

I am spending more time in solitude with God because of the companion of my pet and/or any animal.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree or disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly agree

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